CORONET

Jane Blackmore

Two in Shadow

TWO IN SHADOW

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Waiting until she could come away, here, to this lonely, isolated, ancient tram in the middle of the fields, to find the ultimate freedom.

And now there was no longer any need to wait . . .

She replaced the brush in the bottle, the bottle in its position on the dressing-table. Everything must be in order. From the mirror her own face looked back at her. It was the face of a stranger, calm, emotionless. It didn't look like the face of a woman who was acting while "the balance of her mind was disturbed". The coroner must be left in no doubt. There was no one to hurt. No one to care. She was absolutely sane. It was important that the verdict on her action should be "Guilty". In this way she would balance the scales that had been weighted on the wrong side at the inquest on Sally.

Also by the same author, and available in Coronet Books:

Bitter Honey
It Couldn't Happen to Me
Girl Alone

Two In Shadow

Jane Blackmore

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For NORMA CORNEY

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CHAPTER ONE

THERE WAS no need to hurry. She had all night in which to kill herself.

She pressed the back of the spoon slowly on to the white tablets. In the silence it made a small, whispering noise. The pile of powder was growing. She folded the sheet of paper and tipped the last grains on to the plate and sat with hands folded neatly in her lap, looking at it.

One hundred aspirins. A full bottle. Was that a fatal dose? She wished she knew. It must be impossible to fail.

Her right forefinger made paths through the grains. On the revealed plate she saw the two small blue figures of the lovers in their eternal flight across the bridge. They would still be running when she was dead.

Her eyes glazed. It was coming on again. The shock that held her paralysed. The coroner had been gentle. It wasn't her fault, he had said, in his gentle voice, his cherubic face creased in lines of concern. But the public exoneration was only so many words.

There was no escape from truth. She had killed her own child.

Her body stiffened. She was in the car again. How many times had she re-lived those moments in tormented, sweating terror? If only she hadn't driven so close to the garage wall. If Sally had come out a few seconds later. If Greta's shout had come a second earlier.

But all the "ifs" had fallen together into the terrible pattern.

The roar of the engine filled her head. Home from the day at the office, eager to be with her daughter again, she swung the wheel round. As the car swept down the steep ramp towards the open garage she saw Sally's face at the window. Her heart leaped. The child's smile was a replica of her father's. It always tore at her in the first moment, bringing Bill back to life.

The garage doors shut the child from view. She thrust her foot against the brake pedal. Switched off. Grabbed her handbag – and found that she was unable to open the door. Her skirt was tight. Swearing brightly at her own stupidity, easier to back and come in farther away than to wriggle across the seat and struggle out the far side, she pressed the starter, slammed into reverse, revved the engine and shot backwards up the slope.

"Sally!"

Greta's scream rang in her ears. She thrust against the brake with all her strength. There was a small thud, so small and faint it was scarcely noticeable, but it jarred every bone in her body.

"*Mein Gott!* Sally –"

She heard no words, only the hysterical, sobbing shrieks of the German girl. Her mind was ice-cold. She tugged at the handbrake. Stopped the engine. Slid across the seat. Walked to the back of the car.

Greta had covered her face with her hands and was screaming and sobbing. She didn't look at her. Wasn't aware of her.

Beneath the rear bumper she saw Sally's face. It was unmarked. The eyes were open. Blank. Sunlight played on the straight blonde hair where it had fallen on the concrete. The child was in her new nightdress. The one she had finished making the previous evening. Above the round neckline, below the short puff sleeves, the rounded flesh was deeply tanned. It was warm to the touch of Miranda's fingers. But unresponsive.

"Greta." The sobbing continued. "Greta! Dial 999."

She looked up. The girl stood, trembling, motionless. Suddenly, she was shouting.

"Stop that damned noise! Dial 999 and ask for an ambulance."

The sobs ended on a gulp. Fingers pressed to her twisting mouth, tears streaming down her face, the girl turned and stumbled drunkenly into the house.

On her knees beside the agonisingly motionless body, she didn't cry. Not then – or at any time. She was frozen. Tenderly, with careful strength, she slid her fingers beneath her

daughter's armpits and drew her out from beneath the car, held her cradled in her arms. Before she laid her ear against the warm chest, she knew the truth.

She would never again see Bill's smile on their child's soft lips.

She went through the necessary motions of the next days. The police. The inquest. The funeral. The dismissal of Greta. The tidying of the house. The acceptance of sympathy. The resignation from her job. The visit to the solicitor. The making of a will.

This caused her momentary concern. To whom could she leave the house, the car, the boat, the tram? There was no money to leave. No relations to want the once-beloved possessions. Facing the man across the desk she said in her new, clipped voice. "There's no one. You take them, Laurence." And when he remonstrated, added firmly: "Sell them. Give the money to Peter. He'll find a good use for it!"

She had known, from the moment when she had knelt beside the sunlit face of her child that she was only waiting to be freed from her duties.

Waiting until she could come away, here, to this lonely, isolated, ancient tram in the middle of the fields, to find the ultimate freedom.

And now there was no longer any need to wait.

She saw her finger, the nail polish chipped, resting in the pool of white dust. It was ugly. Slovenly. She lifted the finger and looked at it with vague distaste. Getting up from her position on the bed, she went along the narrow passage between it and one where Sally had slept so many times and slid the door at the back of the tram to one side.

Beyond, in the compartment where, forty years ago, the driver had stood, she entered the small boudoir she had created for herself.

She twisted the brush from the glass bottle and painted over the chipped polish on her nail. Holding her finger to her mouth she blew on it through pursed lips. It was faintly surprising to feel the warmth of her breath. She was so cold it didn't seem possible that there was still heat in her lungs.

She replaced the brush in the bottle, the bottle in its posi-

tion on the dressing-table. Everything must be in order. From the mirror her own face looked back at her. It was the face of a stranger, calm, emotionless. It didn't look like the face of a woman who was acting while "the balance of her mind was disturbed." The coroner must be left in no doubt. There was no one to be hurt. No one to care. She was absolutely sane. It was important that the verdict on her action should be "Guilty." In this way she would balance the scales that had been weighted on the wrong side at the inquest on Sally.

She bent and took a sheet of notepaper from the drawer. Carried it back to the narrow room. The curtains were drawn along the wide windows but the glow sifting through was ripe as peach-bloom. She sat at the table and lifted a corner of the curtain.

The world outside flooded in upon her. Across the two miles of flat pasture-land, knee-deep in mist, sheep settled for the night. The cows had gone to the farm for milking. Dark in the distance, the hill rose steeply. A bank of clouds lay along its crest. Three tiers of flame floated on purple depths. Against the lowest, brightest fire, the church with its square steeple was a black, paper cut-out.

She watched, untouched by the passionate beauty, as the fires burned away. In two minutes the sky was a flat grey, the church faded into the background. The low-lying mist gleamed softly.

She dropped the curtain. Took a Biro from her handbag. Wrote, in a clear, firm hand: Laurence. I am in complete awareness of what I am about to do. Without Bill and Sally I have nothing to live for.

She paused, pen waiting in the air above the paper. There was nothing else to say. She signed her name and replaced the Biro in her handbag.

How long would it be before Laurence found the letter? How long would her body lie on the narrow bed with its old-fashioned patchwork quilt that she had made in the first year of her marriage?

A shiver went through her. The loneliness of this body that was still warm with life stabbed a pin-point of fear. It could be a long time. Perhaps she should have left the car outside.

But the car was in Hastings. She had parked it, deliberately, and walked the miles along the cliff-tops and the beach. She hadn't wanted any unexpected visitors. Too many people who drove along the long road beneath the high sea-wall knew her. Too many people, aware of her loneliness, might call upon her with their helpless, kindly words, and embarrassed, evasive eyes.

She shrugged. It wouldn't matter. When she had left this body behind, nothing would matter any more.

The shadows deepened, rising up from the floor of the tram, engulfing her. She sat, motionless, her hands folded in her lap. The oblong piece of paper gathered the remaining light to itself. A breeze whispered among the rushes in the dyke at the side of the tram. Fifty yards away, across the road, beyond the sea-wall, the waters rolled softly in, hissing and crooning among the pebbles.

This was the magic hour. In other days, she and Bill, and this summer, she and Sally, had got into their swimming costumes and run across the field, climbed the fence, gone along the rutted path, warm beneath their bare feet, over the road, so cold, up the steps and down the other side of the sea-wall – into the tang and delicious shock of the water.

A car raced along the road. As it passed it trailed streamers of music. Its headlamps, already on, filled the tram with a soft pallor. The light was cut off, abruptly. The music faded. At last, the diminishing hum of the engine was lost in the muted sibilation of the waves.

She didn't need to look at her watch. It was twenty minutes past eight. Every night at eight o'clock, Howard Burke left his hotel on the hill, switched on his car-radio, swung down the curving road and sped, foot flat on the floor, along the sea road to his second hotel in the low plain, racing, always, against his own record. At exactly a quarter to eleven he would come tearing back.

She came to a decision. She would do it before he returned. She would be asleep, drifting slowly deeper and deeper when the sound of his musical, roaring car swept by. It would be the last thing she heard. The last, febrile tentacle that held her to life. After that, it was rare that anyone used the sea-

road. It would be a bitter-sweet good-bye. How often had he skidded to a standstill outside the tram, seeing their lights, and come in for a nightcap?

The darkness rose up from the fields and swallowed the tram. She could feel it as if it were a solid wall, enclosing her, hiding her. In its embrace she felt safe. The stiffness went out of her. She relaxed in upon herself. Not moving. Not thinking. Waiting for the moment of freedom.

Spasmodically, cars passed along the road, lighting the silent tram, lifting it, momentarily, from the purple night, holding it poised a few moments before dropping it, abruptly, into the velvet depths. Beyond the sea-wall, the tide reached its zenith, paused, and slowly, sibilantly whispering, began its hours-long ebbing.

The woman was like a fallen leaf in the shadows. Still warm with life, still steeped in colour, but already broken away from the branch that kept the sap flowing.

In the light of one of the cars, after a long gap of darkness, she lifted her left hand from her lap and looked at her watch.

It was time.

She had brought a Thermos of coffee. She had been sitting still so long that when she tried to stand her legs gave way beneath her. Resting her hands on the table, she stretched them slowly, one by one, and felt the blood speed and the stiffness fade from her knees. It struck her as humorous that her body should still protest, demanding attention. Her own low laugh, startled her. She bit her lip against the sound, the first she had made in hours. The last she would ever make.

As she moved, stiff-legged, to the front cabin to get the Thermos, she was vaguely glad that her last human sound should be one of humour. Bill would approve. Sally would giggle, even if, at only three-and-a-half years, she wouldn't understand the adult twist in the drollery.

The Thermos felt smooth in the palm of her hand. She took a cup from the nail Bill had hammered in above her head. Back at the table she twisted off the round top and eased out the cork. She hadn't felt hunger, but now the aroma of the coffee wrinkled her nostrils and set the saliva moving in her dry mouth.

She poured it into the cup, holding the Thermos close to its lip in the darkness and feeling its warm depth with her finger. She went back to the cabin, putting her hand instantly on Sally's silver christening spoon in its position in the drawer. She would wash it and the cup and the Thermos and return them to their ordered places before she lay down beneath the patchwork quilt.

She sat on her chair. The plate felt satin-smooth, cool. She slid the spoon into the powder, filling it with her finger. The cup was warm. Against her tongue the silver spoon was cool.

On the roof of her mouth the powdery dust was bitter. She drank. The unaccustomed sweetness – she never took sugar in her drinks but had carefully sweetened this last one in case she revolted against the taste of the drug – was a shock. A pleasant shock after the dry and acrid mouthful.

She felt the particles floating in the warm, sweet liquid before she swallowed. Methodically, neither hurrying nor hesitating, calm and undisturbed, she repeated the performance.

Intent on the job, isolated by the long, dark hours of waiting that now culminated in this series of mouthfuls of bitter dust and warm, sugared liquid, she heard no sound from the world outside.

Two cars were speeding along the sea-road. Though the sound of the engines failed to pierce her concentrated, fixed tranquillity, the light made her shut her eyes. She didn't want to see. But before she closed her eyelids the tram was imprinted on her mind. Against their darkness she saw it. Detailed. The big red stitches on the patchwork quilt. The white curtains with their pattern of sky-blue cornflowers. The oblong of the sheet of notepaper. The leaf-green Thermos. The coffee in the leaf-green cup, three-quarters empty. The plate with its blue lovers revealed and a thick circle of grey powder surrounding them.

A wave of nausea swept her. She had thought that she must be nearing the end of the aspirins. A full two-thirds still remained on the plate. She should have used a bigger spoon. It was taking too long. But she didn't want to get up. Didn't want to exchange the friendly spoon for an impersonal one.

She swallowed, her throat jerking, her tongue discovering

particles of the drug clinging to her mouth and teeth. Her eyes opened. The tram seemed full of light. She blinked. Quickly, while she could see, she re-filled the cup. The aroma of coffee that had seemed so delicate a delight was now distasteful.

The silver spoon was full, half-way to her mouth when it happened.

Her body jerked and went stiff. Beneath the skin her nerves stretched to fine, red-hot wires.

From outside came the screech of skidding tyres. She waited, taut with knowledge. It came. The horrible, grinding crash.

Anger whipped at her before fear. Fools! Idiots! Hadn't they seen Bill's notice, crimson letters on a white-painted board. "Danger. Beware of edge."

She listened, spoon poised, the powdered aspirin spilling unseen from its tilted plenitude, scattering a shower of grey dust on her lap. The second car was stopping. Voices. Men's voices. Familiar voices. Young voices. How many times had they been warned not to race along this stretch of the road!

Silence. The sound of another voice. Even younger. The voice of a boy, high-pitched and broken with fear.

"Daddie! Are you all right?" And then, on a short, sharp, angry shout: "You swine! You've killed him!"

She found that she was standing, staring at the door, through whose curtains the light shone in a white glare outlining the cornflowers in blackened tracings.

Strange sounds then. Scuffling sounds. Another frightened angry shout from the boy, cut-off short in the middle.

Silence. The bang of a car door. Another door. The racing roar of an engine beneath the sudden release of the clutch and the pressure of the accelerator. The car was going. Roaring away along the road. The light dimmed. But it was still there. Pale beyond the curtains.

She didn't understand. She couldn't think. Irritably she shook her head. Something caught her eye. She looked down. The silver spoon in her hand was empty. On the clean red strip of carpet between the beds a spatter of grey dust.

She stared at it with impatient distaste. She must sweep it up. She raised her head and the light through the curtains

over the door was an added annoyance. The second car must still be there, outside, on the rutted, grassy verge beside the road.

Why didn't it go? Why did it lurk there, calling her in the loud silence?

Angrily, she rejected its call, pressing her hands against her ears, closing her eyes. If it wasn't for the car she could finish her job. Lie down. Go to sleep.

If it wasn't for the boy's shout, ringing inside her head, she could still do it.

Suddenly, she dropped her hands, opened her eyes. The child's fear was a tightening line, drawing her back to life. She could resent it, fight it, but she knew that it would win.

She put the silver spoon down on the plate. It made a small clinking noise. She stood a moment longer. The palms of her hands were damp. She pressed them against each other.

Slowly, deliberately, she walked the few steps across the front cabin. Her hand went out. She saw it, reaching for the metal loop that slid the tram door sideways. A shuddering seized her. She trembled so violently she thought she must fall. Exerting her will, she grasped the cold metal.

There was the expected, jerking resistance as she pressed sideways. Clattering noisily, the door opened.

She stepped out into the world she had rejected. The world she had decided never to see again.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CAR HAD HIT the fence that bounded the grass verge. Its bonnet was beneath the jagged, broken cross-bars. The headlamps shone out across empty fields, losing themselves in the endless darkness.

She heard the sound of moaning as she picked her way carefully across the rutted track. As she got closer the moans deepened into a flood of curses. She reached the door and peered in.

A man's face turned towards her. In the pale glow from the

dashboard it was devoid of colour. The swearing stopped abruptly. A hand came out and grabbed hers where it rested on the open window.

"Boy? You've got him? He's all right?"

She shook her head. Even in her state of confusion she realised that there was something odd about his questions. Before she could grasp the meaning behind his words the grip on her hands tightened. The bones of her fingers crushed against each other. She let out an involuntary cry.

The grip relaxed but he didn't let go. It was as if he had to hold on to her. His eyes pierced hers. She looked on naked fear. Down the side of his face a small liquid darkness was oozing.

She tried to speak but her throat was dry. His face seemed to be drifting away, floating off into the shadows. There was a heavy drumming in the top of her head. She swallowed and forced the muscles of her lips into action.

"You're hurt." Her voice was clipped, antagonistic.

"It doesn't matter about me. Where's Boy?"

"I don't know."

"Damn you, you must know. You're here. You must've seen."

She took her hand from beneath his and stood, looking at him.

"I saw nothing."

"You're lying!"

"If that's what you think . . ."

"No! Don't go!" He passed a hand over his forehead and looked at it.

"You're hurt."

He shook his head and looked up at her again, pleading.

"You didn't see anything?"

"Nothing."

"But you're here."

"I have a tram in the field."

"A tram!" It was a shout of furious incredulity. "I don't know what game you're playing but for God's sake cut it out!"

"You'd better come with me." She turned away. "Your head needs attention."

The heaviness was in her legs. It was an effort to walk across the uneven track. As she dragged her body up on to the stile she heard him press the starter. She sat, inert, legs straddled over the top bar. It was difficult to think clearly. Odd thoughts came and went through the dull stupor. Bill was waiting on the other side of the stile, his arms outheld for her to jump. Sally was pulling at her skirt, mounting the steps with serious two-years-old concentration.

She shook her head. It was impossible. Bill had been dead before Sally could walk.

And that noise. Bill's car never made that noise. Bill never pressed the starter, on and on, the engine not firing.

It stopped. In the silence the song of the sea was familiar. Soothing. Why was she here? On the stile? She ought to be in bed.

As she swung her leg over, a door slammed behind her. The sudden noise jerked her limbs. She stumbled, grabbed at the upright post, missed, and fell, softly sprawling on the grass.

From far away she heard a voice.

"Hey! You! Where are you?"

The grass smelled sweet. It was cool beneath her cheek. Damp. It revived her. She struggled to her feet and answered the call. A man appeared on the stile. Something was different. Her eyes roved beyond him. It was darker. Oh, yes, of course, he had doused the lights. The man jumped to the grass at her side.

"Bill –" she asked, uncertainly. "Is it you?"

"No, it's not."

The grass was slipping away beneath her feet. If it wasn't Bill, who was it? She took a step towards him, peering up into the pale gleam of his face.

"You look a bit like Bill."

"I can look like the Shah of Persia if you like."

His face blurred. "But not all that like him."

"Let's get into this tram of yours. Have you got a phone?"

"A *what*?"

"A telephone." He spoke slowly, distinctly, as if to a child

"We haven't even got water." Her tongue was thick as cotton-wool. "Colin brings it – once a week – fresh for drinking –

unfresh for . . ." Her tongue stopped answering her commands. Her mind blurred. Her legs were like water. She stumbled and felt his arms go round her.

"What's up with you?"

She lay against the warm strength of him and a weak giggle rolled around her throat.

"You drunk?"

He held her from him, at arm's length. She felt the coldness of his eyes and forced her legs to support her.

"No. I'm not drunk."

Drawn up to her full height she intended the words to convey a crushing rejection but they slipped through the sluggish inertia of her brain and flopped out of her woolly lips like so many sleepy seals.

She turned and began to walk up the short slope to the tram. In the centre of the lethargy, with a tremendous effort of concentration, she found a small bright spot, that still issued orders to her body. Her legs moved, one after the other. Her hand found the rail. She mounted the half dozen steps. She no longer knew if the man was following her. It wasn't important. Only one thing remained. To get inside and lie down before she fell down. In the centre of the bright spot one thing was clear. This time she would be unable to get up again.

She reached the bed. Carefully, slowly, she sat on the edge. The springs creaked. From a long way away she heard footsteps, heavy masculine steps on the wooden stairs.

She panicked. Wrapped in a cocoon of torpid drifting, her eyelids weighted so that it took a supreme effort to hold them open, her limbs too heavy to move, there was still a part of her that was alive and shaken with terror.

She struggled against the clouds in her mind. Who was he? What was he doing? His body filled the narrow entrance to the tram, obliterating the pale night sky. The edges of it blurred and swelled.

He was moving. Coming towards her. A scream broke loose within her. No sound came from her thickening lips. She fought against the cobweb threads that bound her. She couldn't move. She could only sit and watch as the distorted face bent down towards her.

"Don't you have any light in this place?"

She was speaking. She heard her own voice with a flood of relief. Didn't know that the words were an almost indistinguishable blur.

"Oil lamp. On the table."

The bed came up to meet her. With a sigh of relief she let the weight of her head fall on to its rough surface. She should get up and remove the patchwork quilt. It didn't matter. She was too tired. She must sleep. Whatever it was that he planned to do she could do nothing to stop him.

Something was happening to her. Something pressed against her eyelid. Lifted it up. Light was a pain. She moved her head and the pressure stopped. She was back in the blissful shadows.

A hard bar went round her shoulder. It was lifting her. She struggled weakly, too far gone for anger, against the intrusion. She was sitting up. Her head rested against Bill's shoulder. She smelled the familiar masculine tweed, the unfamiliar smell of smoke. Bill didn't smoke. Before she had time to try and sort out something cold was held to her mouth.

"Drink."

She turned her head away. Five points jabbed around its back. She struggled against them but they held as firm as an iron clasp. Was she being tortured? She lifted her eyelids a fraction and saw a cup. With a faint awakening of interest she realised that she was thirsty. If it hadn't been so big an effort she would have thanked the familiar stranger for his thoughtfulness.

He held the cup to her lips. She took a big mouthful. Swallowed a little. Spluttered. Felt the liquid dribbling down her chin. This *was* torture. Salt water! To a person dying of thirst!

"Drink!"

The cup was hurting her lips where she held them closely pressed together. The five iron staples held her head in a relentless, motionless position. She could only yield. She drank, gasping and slobbering, hating herself for the undignified spectacle she must be, hating him more as the cause of her distress.

At last – it stopped. For a moment of supreme relief she felt herself laid back on the bed. Her neck was wet but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but this cessation of the effort of swallowing the nauseous water.

Two bars of iron were thrust beneath her armpits.

"Up on your feet!"

She stumbled, leaning against the bars of iron, her body drooping over them like a chicken on a spit. Why was the voice so angry? She only wanted to sleep. Surely, sleep hadn't been made a crime! Guilty! The coroner's rosy face was severe. Guilty of going to sleep.

Her body was suddenly light. There was no weight on her legs. The bars of iron were round her. She was no longer on the ground. She was moving through space. Going down, step by step. The night air was cool. She opened her eyes. He was carrying her. In a sudden rush of gratitude she pressed her face against his neck. It wasn't Bill – but it was kindness such as she hadn't known for a long time.

Perhaps, hope whispered, it *was* Bill. Could it be that she was dying? People who died spoke of seeing a loved human being who had died before them. Was this happening to her? She mumbled, nuzzling against his neck.

"You're sweet."

"Sure!"

"I like you."

"Fine!"

"I love you."

"I'll bet you do!"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Tell me again when you're conscious."

This was too difficult. "Do you love me?"

"I'm crazy about you! You're just what I need at this moment."

If this was death it was also heaven! She snuggled closer, drifting away. The downward motion stopped. She was slipping. She clung to him. It mustn't end. This sweet peace. Her feet touched the ground.

"Walk!"

One arm was stretched over his shoulder. The iron bar beneath her other arm. He moved. She had to walk.

Nausea rose up within her. Peace was shattered. Joy gone. Her body was drawing her back. She fought against it as consciousness awoke. This was the final betrayal. The last ignominy. She fought against it. Furiously. Hopelessly.

She was very sick.

Distantly, her head supported by the steady coolness of his hand, she heard his voice, gentle, tender as she had been with Sally.

"That's my good girl. That's it. That's fine. You're all right now."

The paroxysm passed. Now she could rest. She had heard it in his voice. Her arm was drawn over his shoulder again.

"Come on – another little walk."

"No – no –"

"Just a little one."

"No – please, no more."

"Only an hour or so."

She couldn't speak. He must be mad. To walk up and down outside the shelter of the lighted tram was the action of a lunatic. She had better agree. Do everything he said. Perhaps he'd get tired and she could escape.

Something was falling on her head. She opened her eyes. It was cool and refreshing.

"It's raining."

"Yes. It's raining."

He sounded pleased. He *was* mad. She stopped thinking. She let her legs move. Left – right. Left – right. Following the pressure of the iron arm around her waist.

Slowly, her head began to clear. Thought returned. She had tried to commit suicide. This man, whoever he was, had saved her life. Brought her back from the glorious sleep. A wave of hatred rushed up within her. On its crest she snatched her arm from his shoulder and twisted out of his hold.

"Why did you do it?" she cried.

"Why did *you*?"

His face was in the light from the window at her back. It was a strong face. The jaw was set, the eyes that held hers were bright with contempt.

She held her own head high. "I suppose I should be grate-

ful to you – but I'm not." The pain of being alive was more than she could bear. She broke beneath it and, turning, ran up the steps and into the haven of the tram.

She heard him following and swung round to face him.

"Get out!"

He came in at the door. She noted the dried, congealing blood on his forehead and thrust it from her mind. His troubles were nothing to do with her. She had all she could cope with in the immediate future. It was going to take all her strength to take up the burden of living again.

He was standing, motionless, his arms at his side, filling the narrow doorway. She writhed beneath the scorn in his eyes.

"Get out!" It was a high-pitched shriek. "You've done enough to me! Now, leave me alone!"

"To do it again?"

"That's my business."

"It's mine now."

She stood, trembling with impotent fury, hating him with a violence of emotion greater than anything she had experienced. In a single stride he was beside the table. He lifted the plate with its scattered, powdered drug.

"You certainly meant to make sure."

"Of course."

His eyes examined her. "You don't look like a fool."

Her lip curled. "Is that meant to be a compliment?"

He turned. Carrying the plate, he went out into the night. She ran a hand through her hair. His words sparked off a flash of self-consciousness. Twisting on her heel, she went into the little boudoir, lit a candle and pulled the door shut behind her.

The mirror showed her a travesty of herself. Her hair was lank with rain. Her eye-black had run in streaks. Her lipstick was smudged. Her skin an ugly jaundiced yellow. She was shamed by the sight.

Quickly, she did what she could, washing the streaks of black with a handkerchief dipped in the small jar of nasturtiums. How long ago had she picked them from the tub at the front and put them on the table? She powdered. Re-lined her mouth. There wasn't much she could do with her hair but she

shook eau-de-cologne on to her hand and rubbed it up the back of her neck and round the front above the line of her dress.

The door rattled in its sockets as she went back. He was sitting on the bed. Bill's bed. His head was bowed in his hands but he looked up at the noise of the door. A smile softened the harsh lines of his face.

She tossed her head. "Don't think I did it for you."

"Why should you? I only saved your life – to say nothing of your immortal soul!"

"I suppose you expect me to say thank you."

The smile faded. "Frankly, I don't give a damn what you say."

He took a cigarette-case from his jacket and clicked it open. Held it out to her.

"I don't smoke."

"Very sensible!"

She watched him put a cigarette in his mouth, fish a lighter from the same pocket, flick it alight. His hand trembled as he held it up. Sympathy brushed her with fluttering wings. Long ago her body had stepped out of the door, now she took the first step back towards human contact.

"Your head –" she said quietly. "Does it hurt?"

His hand moved vaguely, his fingers touching the wound. His eyes came up to hers. "Do you remember anything about the accident?"

She moved towards him. "Let me look at that first."

His hair was wet and thick and dark. She parted it and pinched at the jagged wound. It was small but ugly. A bruise was spreading over his temple.

"Do you?" he repeated sharply.

"Not much."

She went into the fore cabin and came back with the first-aid box. He began to move.

"Sit down."

"Forget it! I must *do* something. I can't sit here. I've wasted too much time on you already."

She stood, legs braced, in front of him. "Look, I can't hold

you down –" A faint smile touched her lips. "– as you held me."

He gave her a quick look and slumped back on the bed.

"It's Boy." His voice was harsh.

"Boy?" She took a pair of scissors and began to cut away the hair.

"She's got him."

The scissors poised. Her heart tightened as she heard again the frightened "Daddie!" Deliberately, she cut away the last piece of hair, dropped it to the floor and selected a strip of Elastoplast.

"Keep still." With one hand, fingers firm, she pressed the edges of the gaping wound together, with the other, carefully, gently, she pressed the plaster down.

"I expect that's the wrong thing to do," she said, standing back, "but it'll keep it clean until I can get you to the hospital."

He sprang to his feet. "No hospital! I've got to find him."

"I'll make some more coffee."

A hand grabbed her shoulder as she turned away, spun her back to face him.

"Life means nothing to you," he shouted. "But it does to me. Don't you understand? She's got my son."

Her lips bit the word into silence. He stared through her, the muscles in his jaw working. She shivered.

"Listen," she said, trying to sound calm and practical. "Your car is useless –"

He broke in. "You must have one."

"I have." Her face was wry. "In Hastings."

"Hastings."

The strength went out of him. His big body fell in upon itself.

"I didn't want anyone to know I was here."

"Where's the nearest village."

"Two-and-a-half miles."

"I'll walk."

"And then?"

The desperate despair in his eyes tugged at her heart. "Coffee," she said. "We both need it." She glanced at her watch. "A car will be here in twenty minutes."

"How do you know?"

"It passes every night."

"Passes!" He took a step towards the door. "I'll go and stop it."

"It'll stop. When Howard sees my light, he'll stop." She paused in the doorway. "Lie down and tell me what it's all about."

She moved into the front cabin and lit the gas. It was another moment of contact with life. She had put flowers in the tram but she had brought coffee in a Thermos. Instinct had warned her that she must make no move in the tram that would hold her to the needs of the body. She had come here, a hunted animal, to die. There had to be no link with other days. Even so small a thing as lighting the gas, waiting for the kettle to boil, could disturb the frozen stillness of her decision.

"Now – it made a small glow in the cabin. She went outside, the kettle in her hand. It had stopped raining. The scent of salt sea and wet grass was bitter-sweet. She stood, motionless, head raised, sniffing at the air.

How could she have forgotten? How could she have wanted never again to smell the fragrant, living earth?

Trembling, she walked round the tram. Lifting the wooden cover, she dipped the kettle in the water-tank. The sound of it, dripping, was music.

The light from the curtained windows of the tram lay on the grass. She looked down at its silken, silver-green sheen.

Sight, sound, scent, all the emotions of the senses welled up within her. Her perceptions were sharpened, hypersensitive to the night around her. She walked with care, conscious of each blade of grass, glistening with rain, bending beneath her feet.

The man was right. Who was she to decide that life was to be lightly valued? Who was she to think that her own should be free of trouble?

She wanted, suddenly, passionately, to retrieve herself in his eyes. To replace the look of contempt with something worthwhile. The urge was so strong that she ran up the steps on its quickening impulse.

CHAPTER THREE

HE LAY ON THE bed, his hands behind his head, eyes closed. A shock sped along her nerves. Just for a moment he looked so like Bill, her mind was confused.

He opened his eyes and the moment passed. Bill's eyes had been blue. His were brown. The illusion was gone.

She put the kettle on the gas. It spluttered at the drops of water that fell from the outside. She went and sat on her own bed.

"I think it's time for introductions. My name's Miranda. Miranda Miller."

"Michael Sheridan."

"Of course!"

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"You're the newest angry young man. You wrote *The Tap in the Pantry*."

"You don't like it."

"In parts. But you know nothing about women!"

"I don't?"

"No. No woman would treat the man she loves like Bella does."

A shadow fell across his face. He swung his legs to the ground and reached for another cigarette from his open case.

Miranda went on, talking quickly. "Now I understand. I always thought you were like Bill from your pictures."

"Bill?"

"My husband." A memory teased. "Did I. . . . When I was all dopy, was I – affectionate?"

A smile flashed across his face, lighting it with humour.

"You were."

She felt the blush rising.

"You said you loved me," he teased.

"I apologise."

"You needn't." His voice tightened. "Long time since anyone said that to me. Even in a state of semi-consciousness."

Her mind clicked. Headlines. Sheridan and wife separate. Sheridan snatches son at airport.

"And now," she said quietly, "she's taken him back."

"Damn her to hell!"

He strode to the entrance.

"Poor little boy," she whispered.

He spoke out into the night. "One day – I'll kill her."

Miranda froze. If he had spoken in temper she could have laughed it off. But he spoke quietly, almost gently, with a horrible conviction.

The kettle began to whistle. She got up, glad of the interruption. The front cabin was so small she brushed against his arm as she reached for the cups. He sprang away from the touch and stood, facing her, on the narrow platform outside. For a moment their eyes locked. Something passed between them. She knew that her association with this man could never be an easy one. She would hate him. Or, her heart missed a beat, she would love him. His concentrated gaze seemed to look into the innermost recesses of her thoughts. She dropped her eyelids against the intrusion and went to pour the coffee.

"You know," she said brightly, her voice unreal in the silence, "you and your wife should come to an agreement." He didn't answer. "I've no milk; will you have sugar?"

"No."

She lifted the two cups and carried them back into the tram.

"It's not fair to him," she went on in the brightly unnatural voice, "to make him a pawn in your quarrels."

"Do you think I don't know that!"

"Then why don't you come to an agreement?"

He came back, slowly. "You play chess?"

She looked up, surprised at his question. "A little."

"Do you come to terms with your opponent?"

"Of course not! But this is no game."

"To her it is. She'll go on. Until she reaches checkmate."

"And that will be when?"

"When she has enough money."

She passed him his cup. "Why don't you give her what she wants?"

"There isn't enough for that!"

"And so the two of you use your son. *You* steal him at the airport. *She* snatches him from your car." She stopped short as her mind clicked in with another piece of jig-saw. "I don't get it."

"It's quite simple. Boy's mine. I mean to have him."

"But she's his mother." Miranda's mind raced as she spoke, trying to understand her own thoughts.

"Her body gave birth to him. That's all. She doesn't love him. Doesn't care what all this does to him. She loves no one but herself."

"I said you didn't understand women."

"I understand *this* one."

Miranda got up and walked to the door. After a swift glance at him she turned and went out on to the porch. She didn't want to see bitterness and hatred. She wanted to remember him as he had been. She wasn't ready, yet, to face the ugliness of the reverse side of his nature.

The night was all around. The long road was invisible. No light was on the dark miles.

"Your friend's late."

"He'll come."

Was it possible? Could she be mistaken? She tried to pierce the veil of the drug that darkened memory. Had she recognised the voices of the young men, calling to each other? Or had it been a trick of her stupified mind? It was a fact that Derek and Rupert were the local teddy boys, but would they stoop to kidnapping?

She blinked. Howard was coming. Far along the road, brightening in the darkness, two pin-points of light were rushing towards her.

"He's here."

Michael was at her side.

"Thank God!"

He pushed past her. She saw him spring up and over the stile, vaulting the bars without standing on the steps. Against the growing light his figure was a huge black outline. He stood in the road, arms outstretched, as if he embraced the rushing car.

"You must tell the police." Howard Burke, round of face, pot-bellied, leaned against the inner door of the tram.

"No." Michael's voice snapped like a broken wire. "Boy's had too much publicity in his seven years. No police."

"Kidnapping's a serious offence," Howard insisted. "Not as serious as in the States. It doesn't entail the death sentence but it's not looked on in a kindly light." He moved his shoulder against the wall and added: "I assume that *you* have custody."

"I have."

"Then I stump for the police."

Michael's eyes came round to Miranda. "And you?"

She looked at him steadily. His gaze was troubled.

"It's the obvious thing to do," she said softly.

He got to his feet and strode the few steps to the inner door.

"Damn it," he swore. and it was like a prayer. "I can't do it! The press'll go to town. Another Roman Holiday provided for them by the Sheridans." He swung round and his face was distorted. "The child must be protected. I don't care about myself." His voice was ironical. "All publicity is grist to my mill! But Boy –" Tenderness was like pain as he lifted his hands and let them fall to his sides in a gesture of hopelessness. "He's only a child. He's entitled to a private life."

"O.K.," Miranda agreed. "We'll do it your way."

His look of gratitude was sheer joy. She had achieved her purpose. The contempt was gone. She turned to the other man.

"Did you see Derek and Rupert tonight?" she asked.

He repeated the names on a note of surprise.

"Did you?"

"Why?"

"I think I recognised their voices."

Michael was on the bed at her side. "You heard them? You know them? The devils who pushed me off the road?"

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I – I can't be sure."

Her eyes appealed to him to understand. Not to speak of her attempted suicide, of her drugged mind. Hope faded from his face. She looked up at Howard who was watching her with a keen scrutiny. If he guessed anything he didn't say so.

He only said: "They weren't in the bowling alley."

"Then it could have been them. It's Friday. They're always there on Fridays."

Howard said, moving away from the door. "It's only just after eleven. If they're in town they'll be at *The Tarantula.* You got your car?"

"No."

His eyebrows lifted. "No?"

"It's in Hastings."

The muscles of her stomach tightened against a sickening lurch, waiting for his next question. It was Michael who broke in.

"Can we use yours, Burke?"

For a moment Howard's gaze was hotly on her face. Then, his fat little body rolling round, his voice trailing after him as he went out of the door, he said: "Of course. I'm at your service."

They were alone. Miranda didn't look at him.

"Thank you," she whispered.

For an instant his hand touched her shoulder.

"We both have problems," he said. "Yours are no concern of mine. I'm grateful to you for getting yourself involved in this unholy mess."

She raised her face to his. "This unholy mess of yours has brought me back to life." She faltered, and went on firmly: "If it wasn't for you I'd be dead." A tremulous smile curved her lips. "It's strange, I hated you – but, now –"

"Now?" he prompted, unsmiling.

"Now I find it good to be alive." She moved away to hide the sudden dampness in her eyes. "You go on. I'll put out the light." She felt him hesitate. "Please. I'll follow – in a moment."

He squeezed past her, not touching her in the narrow space between the beds. She heard his footsteps going down the wooden stairs.

The wave-whisper was faint. No breath of wind rustled the long rushes in the dyke. Rain whispered on the roof.

She put out a hand to the lamp. The tram drew warm and close around her. The patchwork quilts with their red stitches were memories of happiness. The cornflowers were crisp on

the white curtains. On the red carpet was a faint spray of dust. Small clumps of dark hair. The leaf-green Thermos gaped. The cups, his and hers, were brown with drying coffee. The past mingled with the future. Tomorrow she would come back. Tidy. Clear away the evidence of the night.

Tomorrow. Or some other day.

Her fingers turned. The light faded. She leaned over the bowl of the lamp and blew it into darkness. She reached for her handbag and went out on to the platform. She pulled the door sideways. It jerked shut. She turned the key, took it from the lock and slipped it into her bag.

Turning her back she ran on light feet down the wooden steps, climbed the stile, went quickly, sure-footed among the ruts in the path.

Howard had turned the car. The engine ticked over, the lights cut a clean line into the night, along the straight ribbon of the road.

She got into the vacant seat beside Howard, supremely conscious, her own body quivering in response to the invisible vibrations of the man in the back seat.

The car leaped forwards.

"We'll go to Warburg," Howard drawled over his shoulder, "and arrange for him to come and get your car in the morning."

"Thanks," Michael said.

His voice was like a shawl around her shoulders, warm and comforting, deep and masculine. She sat, very still, aware that she could easily make too much of every little thing he said. Could all too easily read meanings into his actions that weren't there. That she was in danger of leaning on his strength. That she was in the greatest danger of falling in love with him.

It mustn't be. She mustn't let herself take his actions as anything personal. He would have done the same things for anyone he had found in her circumstances. It wasn't for *her* that he had kept her body alive. It was for humanity. Just for the present he needed her help. But that was all.

She sat straight and still, watching the road-ribbon vanish beneath the bonnet of the car and knew that all her silent, self-administered lecturing was to no avail. The strength of

him, the magnetism, the strangeness of their meeting in the moment when each was passing through the fires – all linked her to him in an inevitable, unbreakable mesh of powerful emotion.

For her own sake she must keep a firm control on emotion. She had retrieved herself from his contempt. Whatever it cost her, she must never behave so that she would see embarrassment in his eyes. Or pity. That would be death in life.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TARANTULA was full of teenagers. Music blared from the juke box. The Espresso machine hissed.

Miranda shrank from the noise, pausing in the doorway. Sheridan stood at her shoulder.

"Are they here? Can you see them?"

She braced herself and moved forwards, searching the room, peering into the pale faces that seemed to float in the semi-darkness.

"Yes! There they are! By the juke box."

The record ended. As Sheridan pushed past her she saw Derek, his blonde head with its straight, long hair gleaming as he moved, put a coin in the slot. She was paralysed by a sick anticipation. The arm of the player swung back. The new record fell into place. The arm moved forwards, poised, dropped.

As the music blared out Derek executed a flowing, twisting step. Rupert bent at the knees, clicking his fingers. Miranda jerked forwards, hurrying after the big body that pushed through the crowded tables.

"Michael!" Her voice was swallowed in the noise. A girl with a mass of brown hair stood up in her path and Miranda collided with her.

"Hey! Mind who you're pushing!"

"I'm sorry."

The girl's mouth was sulky. As Miranda eased past, she

heard the drawling voice: "You don't own the place!" And another girl: "Oh, sit down, Polly! You don't either!"

Sheridan had reached the juke box. As Derek swung, body bent, eyes glazed, he caught his arm. Both young men stopped moving. Sheridan stood between them. For a moment it was like the child's game of statues as all three froze and stared at each other.

Miranda reached the group as Derek said, his voice high and tight, "Watch it, Daddy-o! I don't dig being man-handled."

The sound of his voice, the odd, idiomatic phrases, were like a TV play. Miranda felt unreal. As if it wasn't happening.

But it was. Sheridan's hold tightened, the knuckles whitening as he said, low and threatening: "And I don't 'dig'" – the word spat through thin lips – "being pushed off the road by a pair of young devils!"

A split-second gleam flashed in Derek's pale eyes. Fear, excitement, triumph, all were there. Then, so quickly Miranda doubted that she had seen any of it, the eyes were vacantly mocking.

"I don't get you," he drawled.

"Oh yes, you do, young man."

"Hey, Rupert – do you get him?" His manner was insolent, truculent.

Rupert lounged against the edge of the juke-box. Light from it shone upwards on the angles of his face giving it grotesque shadows. His hands were thrust in the pockets of his black leather jacket. A cigarette hung from his lower lip. He didn't speak, but his eyes glittered with excitement.

Sheridan's arm jerked Derek close to him. The room went still. The Espresso stopped in the middle of a renewed hiss. The talk died. Only the music blared. And, for Miranda, the pounding of the blood in her ears.

"I'll get you." Sheridan's voice was low, but the words sent a shock of movement round the room.

Miranda felt fear twitch across her scalp. She felt, too, the antagonism in the craning faces, the rising tide of crowd-resentment.

She put a hand on Sheridan's arm. The muscles were like iron beneath her fingers.

"Michael –"

For a moment he didn't seem to hear her.

"Michael!" She pressed the tips of her fingers into his forearm. "Let me. Please, let me talk to them."

Derek flashed her a broad grin. a gleam of teeth and gums.

"Yes, Daddy-o! Let the chick talk to us."

Sheridan's hand fell to his side. He towered above the slight, undeveloped figure of the youth. Miranda turned to Derek, aware that the tension in the room drew taut around her.

"Derek," she said, hoping her voice sounded smooth and easy, "I want to talk to you. Can we go out of here?"

His eyes flicked to his friend and back to her. Although Rupert hadn't spoken, Miranda had felt that in his squat, silent figure there was more menace than in the more exuberant young man.

Now, as if he followed unspoken instructions, Derek demanded: "What's wrong with here? If you don't like it, you don't have to stay."

He spoke brightly but she had the feeling it was bravado to cover an inner disquiet. She kept her gaze on his face but his eyes darted away. He looked down at his long, pointed shoes and shuffled a small dancing step, swaying from foot to foot, fingers clicking.

At her side, Michael drew in a sharp breath. Her own fists clenched. Derek swung round in a tight circle that finished by bringing him close to her. Knees bent he peered up into her face, his lips drawn sideways, mocking her.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"Derek –" She paused, knowing it was useless to question him.

"I'm all ears!" His hands sprang up and held them forwards, away from his head. He turned to his silent, lounging friend. "Big-ears, that's me! How's my old pal, Noddy?"

Rupert inclined his head, nodding it up and down. The two of them roared with laughter.

"Derek!" Her voice was loud, cutting a sharp path through the clamour.

He twisted sideways, looking up at her. The grin died. He straightened and moved close so that his face was on a level with hers. She saw the blue flecks in his eyes as he stared at her. She knew the effort of control that Michael was exerting on himself and rushed, headlong, into words.

"Were you out on the sea-road tonight? You and Rupert?"

"What if we were?"

"Were you?" she insisted.

"Maybe."

"No maybe," she cried. "I know you were. I heard you."

Again the flash of fear. He covered it, instantly. "So what! Is it any of your business what we do?"

"It could be."

He thrust his face even closer. She felt his breath on her cheek and forced herself to keep her position.

"I didn't know you were interested in us," he mocked. "Which is it? Me?" His thumb jerked sideways. "Or him?"

She stared into his eyes, hypnotised, paralysed with loathing. All the confused emotion of the long day and night concentrated in a taut spring within her.

"Don't be shy, chick!" The voice leered at her. "Speak up! We're willing. Both of us. And we're ready."

The sound of her hand on his face was a shock to both of them. He sprang back, angry colour flooding up to his temples. Sick shame filled her, welled into her mouth. Before either of them could speak, Sheridan's fist shot out. It caught the pointed chin, fair and square. The narrow face jerked backwards on the neck. The slight body followed as if at the tug of a rope and crashed against the juke-box. The needle jumped and the music blared on.

A girl shrieked his name. Another shouted: "Hold it, Polly!" Miranda didn't look round but she was aware of the circle of faces, angled towards them, sending out a gaseous antagonism. She tightened her muscles. It needed only a spark to set fire to the angry emotion of the crowded room.

Derek recovered. He lunged forwards. She saw Sheridan brace his big body on his legs. She saw something else. Something that flashed in the light as Rupert moved, negligently, from his position by the juke box.

"Michael!" she shouted. "Behind you!"

Sheridan turned his head. Derek stopped. The record finished on a blaze of drums. No one moved. Not a sound broke the silence.

Rupert stood, knees bent, body bent, in his hand a knife.

It was Howard who broke the tension. She had forgotten him, but now he appeared at Rupert's back.

"I wouldn't do it," he said, without emotion, his quiet voice reaching through the room.

Rupert's eyes flicked sideways, came back to Sheridan. For what seemed a never-ending moment, he stood, swaying a little on his feet. His tongue licked at his lips.

Suddenly, in a single movement, he closed the knife, thrust it in the pocket of his black leather coat, and lounged easily past the motionless figure of Sheridan.

"Come on," he snapped. "Let's go."

Derek moved after him. He gave Sheridan a quick look and a wide berth as he rubbed his chin. The young men swaggered through the silence of the room.

The girl, Polly, reached out a hand as he passed her. "Can I come, Derek?"

He hesitated. Without pausing in his swaying, animal walk, Rupert snapped an abrupt: "No."

Derek gave the girl a thin-lipped smile. His shoulders hunched as he walked on. Rupert opened the door, turned, and stared at Sheridan in sullen insolence.

"It's dull here tonight," his voice rasped. He flung a challenging look round the room. "Last man in pays!"

There was a sudden movement. Half a dozen youths stood up. There was a rush for the door.

The door gaped behind them. No one moved. No one spoke. The circle of eyes swung back, enclosing the three by the jukebox.

The proprietor came from behind the bar. Walked across the room. Pushed a coin in the slot. The arm swung. The music began. The room settled back into noisy normality.

"Quick," Sheridan said, jerking back to life. "After them!"

He went from her, threading his way through the tables. She glanced at Howard who gave her a wry look and mo-

tioned her on with a wave of his hand. As she came level with the table, Polly stood up, barring her way.

"We got a bad name cos we make a lot of noise and go fast, but Derek's O.K. Bit mad on his bike – but 'e's nice." Her voice was low, breathless. The words tumbled out in a rush. Her eyes flicked round to the door. "But Rupert's a nut-case. Crazy." She leaned even closer, whispering: "He was up to something tonight."

Miranda's heart missed a beat.

"How do you know?"

The second girl tugged her friend down with a sudden jerk of her hand.

"You crazy, too?" she hissed.

From outside came the sound of a motor bicycle engine bursting into life. A second one. A third. The room throbbed with the reverberations. At the back of Miranda's mind the noise raised a question mark but she pushed it deeper, concentrating all her attention on the down-dropped head of the girl in front of her.

Miranda leaned down. "Tell me," she urged. "What do you know?"

"She don't know nothing."

"But she said –"

"Leave her alone. She don't know nothing. She was here, with me, all evening. She talks wild. That's all. Derek's her boy. She hates Rupert. She'll say anything that comes into her stupid head to get him into trouble. Silly idiot! It'll be *her* who gets the trouble."

Miranda looked at Polly. Head down, her face was hidden by the thick mop of brown hair.

"Polly –" The shoulder beneath her fingers was thin. It jerked away from her touch. She tried again, bending low, trying to see the concealed face. "Please tell me. I'm on your side. I'll help you get Derek free from Rupert."

The girl's face came up. The mop of hair was a frame for the childish features. The too-bright lips trembled. The round wide eyes were drenched with fear.

"You heard Lulu," she said, her voice sullen. "I got nothing to say. I imagine things."

"You're making a mistake, not trusting me."

"Maybe." The red lips quivered. "But I can't do nothing else. I don't want trouble with Rupert."

"If you won't fight. . . ."

"Oh, can it!" Lulu chipped in.

Miranda straightened. "If you change your mind – you can get me through Mr. Burke at The Old Mill."

"She won't," Lulu sighed.

Miranda ignored her. "Remember what I say, Polly."

She moved on. The door was open. Michael snapped at her.

"What the devil have you been doing! They've got away."

"I'm sorry. That girl . . ."

He broke in. "If you'd come when I said we'd've followed them."

"I said I'm sorry."

He began to speak, stopped, pressed his lips together and turning, strode away from her. Howard put a hand on her elbow. She gave him a quick half smile and moved across the pavement to where Michael stood, beside the car.

Howard said: "I still think the police . . ."

Sheridan cut him short. "I said no."

Howard shrugged. "What now?"

"I'm damned if I know! I feel so helpless."

His shoulders bowed. Miranda was tempted to slip a hand in his but she resisted the impulse.

"How about bed?" She crushed a yawn. She was, suddenly, desperately tired. Her whole body ached with exhaustion. Her mind was a blob of wet cotton-wool.

In the light of a street lamp his face softened.

"You must be all in."

"I am."

"Not the tram."

She shivered. No, not the tram. Not tonight. She couldn't be alone in the night-dark meadows.

Howard said: "I can give you rooms at The Old Mill."

"Can you?"

"Nothing fancy. We're pretty full."

"Anything'll do," Sheridan said.

They piled into the car, drove along the road, up the steep hill to the hotel.

"Hungry?" Howard asked.

"I couldn't eat." She should be hungry. When had she last eaten? Breakfast that morning. But she wasn't hungry. Only dropping with tiredness.

"How about a drink?"

Michael said: "A brandy's the thing for you, my girl."

With an effort she looked up at him. Was it an appeal she heard in his voice, saw in his eyes? Or was it another twist of her own loneliness? Dimly, through the waves of exhaustion, she remembered her decision.

"Just bed," she murmured.

"After brandy." Michael's voice was low and insistent. "You need something to relax you."

She yielded. It was a delicious sensation, even if he only acted from a motive of humanity, there was no need for her to refuse his concern for her. She was going to need all the scraps of kindness he was prepared to throw her.

They followed Howard into his private room. He poured the drinks. She dared not sit down for fear she would fall, instantly, into the open arms of sleep.

The brandy burned her dry throat. A small glow of warmth spread as she drank.

At last, they were mounting the stairs. Howard showed them to two small rooms on the top floor, said good night and left them alone. She stood beside the uncurtained window and listened to his retreating footsteps.

"You'll be all right?" Michael asked behind her.

She turned and looked at him. His eyes were gentle, but his jaw was stiff.

"Will you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Don't worry about me."

"But I do."

She saw the urgency of her voice reflected in the narrowing of his eyes and moved quickly to the dressing-table.

"Wish I had a toothbrush," she said, trying to laugh.

"Me too!"

His image in the mirror was close to her own. His lips

moved as if he began to say something. Her heart quickened. He turned with an abrupt movement, going to the door. She stood, motionless, holding herself closely together, not looking round. So long as she saw only his reflection she could keep control of the weakening emotion that flooded her limbs. Let her only turn and see the reality of him and she knew that she would run into his arms.

"Good night." Her voice was impersonal. "Sleep well."

"Sleep! I'll not sleep."

He was gone. Without a backward glance. The door closed behind him.

She spun round. Her feet soundless on the thick carpet she sped to the door. Her hand was on the knob before she arrested her impulse. She leaned her throbbing head against the cool wood. She had no way of knowing that he still stood in the passage, wanting to return, resisting his own impulse.

The door between them, they waited, needing each other, refusing each other out of a mistaken belief that each might be making a selfish use of the other's extremity.

Boy's face was suddenly clear. Twisting on his heel, Michael strode to his room. Doubts tore him one way and another. Pacing up and down he forgot her.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHE COULDN'T SLEEP. Her legs ached. She lifted them restlessly. The sheets, so cool when she slid between them, grew hot. She flung off the blankets, turned the pillow. In a moment the heat was on her again. Her body twisted. Her head felt light, hollow. In its brittle, floodlit spaces thoughts spun on an endless wheel.

A sense of failure possessed her. Could she have said more to Derek? To Polly? What had Polly meant? Did she know anything, or was it merely guesswork?

The boy – where was he now? Sally's face rose in the centre of the light within her head. A sharp pain stabbed her. If it were Sally who had been snatched from her! The blood was

drumming loudly in her ears. Was Michael lying in the room along the passage, tossing from side to side?

She got out of bed and went to the window. The night air was cool on her bare shoulders. Without a nightdress, she was in her petticoat. She shivered as she rested her hands on the sill and leaned out. In an angle of the hotel, against the white-washed wall, she saw the glow of light from his window.

In an instant she was across her floor. Pulling her coat on as she went she walked quickly along the passage. At his door she raised her hand to knock. Not a sound came from within. Her fingers poised, bent, ready. She tried to visualise him.

What was he doing? Smoking? Lying on his bed, staring at the image of his son as she had stared at Sally?

A muffled noise made her nerves jerk. She pressed her ear against the wood. He was blowing his nose. Suddenly, she knew that she couldn't intrude, that his privacy must not be invaded.

She moved quickly, silently on bare feet, along the passage and into the bathroom. Her mouth was parched. She turned the tap and bent to drink. Wiping her lips on the back of her hand, she hurried back to her room.

The door was open. She stopped, fire racing across her skin. Had she left it open? She couldn't remember. She glanced over her shoulder. Should she go and call Michael? Her shoulders squared. She was being foolish. No one would want to come into her room. She must have left the door as it now stood.

She forced her legs to carry her towards the gaping darkness. In the entrance she paused. A pale light showed her the window but the rest of the room was lost in shadow.

Her throat contracted. She tried to speak but nothing came out. She could feel the presence of someone in the room. Someone waiting for her in the thick darkness. She held her breath and listened, trying to locate the sound of another's breathing. She heard only the drum-beat of the blood, pounding in her own ears

"Is anyone there?" It was a hoarse whisper.

Silence. A quietness so filled with menace it was almost

tangible. A soft rustling sound. Her heart raced. Her head swam. She mustn't faint.

Somehow she found the strength to lift her arm. There was a click and light flooded the room. It sprang to life. The dressing-table, the wardrobe, the low chair. The bed. A hysterical giggle broke from her parted lips.

In the centre of her rumpled blankets a big black cat looked up at her, its forepaws kneading the soft pile.

"Tom!" she sobbed, between laughing and crying. "You scared the daylights out of me!"

She shut the door, flung her coat on the chair and climbed back on to the high bed. Reaching down, she gathered the cat into her arms. A low purring began as she cuddled it against her. She lay down, curling her body around its silken, throbbing life.

Almost instantly, she was asleep.

She woke, abruptly, to full consciousness. Someone was knocking on her door. She sat up, holding the sheet close, testing the sound of the knock. It came again, three short, quick raps.

"Who is it?"

"Michael."

Like the firm taps with his knuckles his reply was brief and to the point. Not for Michael Sheridan the indefinite reply, the subtle intimacy: "It's me."

"Just a minute."

Sliding off the bed she reached for her coat and went to the door. As she opened it the cat streaked past, a black shadow along the passage. She didn't see it go. She saw only the man's face, grey beneath the darkening stubble of his unshaven beard.

"Has something happened?"

He shook his head. "I can't stand my room any longer."

"You haven't slept?"

"No."

She hesitated. Then she stepped aside. "Come in."

"Did I wake you?"

"I don't mind." She shut the door. "Go and look out of the window while I dress."

When he had moved past her she let the coat fall on to the bed and reached for her dress. Her nerves tingled but her voice was light and easy.

"I wouldn't've slept either if Tom hadn't kept me company."

"Tom!"

Did she imagine the sharpened note? Through the folds of the dress, she laughed.

"The hotel cat!"

"A cat!"

Was there relief in his voice? Her head came through the dress. He was lighting a cigarette.

"Tom's a great companion. You can have him tonight!"

"It'll take more than a cat to let me sleep."

She wanted to go to him. To comfort him. Her mind sought words of assurance, but found none.

"I'm decent now."

He turned and leaned against the window edge, looking at her. She ran a hand through her hair.

"I feel a mess!"

"You don't look it."

"I wasn't fishing!"

"Weren't you?" A faint smile softened his lips. "Of course! I forgot! I don't understand women!"

"Maybe I was," she laughed and went to the dressing-table. The comb slid through her hair. "It's a long time," she said quietly, "since a man was in my bedroom."

"It's a long time since I was in a woman's bedroom."

Vividly aware of his gaze as she took the powder compact from her handbag, it was as if she performed each familiar action for the first time. She was tremblingly alive, a young girl on the morning of her first love-affair. It was a delicious sensation. Delicate. Tenuous. Her breath quickened but she didn't speak. She was afraid of words. The moment of intimacy was easily broken. She would do nothing to cut it short. Say nothing that might disperse this long-forgotten

fluttering of butterfly wings. This trembling of the senses. This waking of the heart.

She replaced the compact. Took out a lipstick and outlined her mouth. He, too, was silent. Was he aware of her? As she was of him? She put the top on the lipstick and dropped it in her bag. There was nothing else she could do.

She turned, slowly, and looked at him. His eyes were unfathomable. He took a quick drag on the cigarette and sent it, with a flick of his finger and thumb, spinning out of the window.

The moment was gone. A chill rippled over her skin. She stood up. "It's too early for breakfast," she said. "Let's go for a walk."

They went down the stairs, past the closed doors, through the silent hotel. In the entrance hall a maid was Hoovering. The low hum of the machine was cut off as they went through the door.

Their feet made small, clear noises on the cobbled slope of the hill. They came out on to the main road and walked down to the beach.

The sea was mysterious and unreal in the light of early morning. Within the circle of the horizon line it was a flat painting on silk, stretched so gently around the seaweed-strewn beach there was no clear moment where one began and the other ended. Here and there a tiny wave curled its white feathering tongue, lapping softly on to the sand with the incoming tide.

A swoop of seagulls flashed across from one feeding-ground to another. They called to each other in short, sharp cries that swelled, fitfully, into a long-drawn, ululating wail.

A little girl in a scarlet jersey rode down the slope of the beach and pedalled away towards the sea.

She felt him stiffen at her side. His pace quickened.

"It's not knowing." The words were clipped. "If only I knew what she's doing to him."

"She won't hurt him."

"Not physically." His laugh jarred. "Boy's too valuable a pawn in her game." He paused, adding, helplessly: "He's scared of the dark."

"It's light now," she said, aching for him. "Maybe by tonight you'll have him back."

"If I could believe that!"

"You must!" She put all the conviction she couldn't feel into the words. "You've got to have faith."

He stopped short and swung on her. "In what?"

She looked up into his drawn face. "In God."

"*You* talk to me of God," he cried, rejecting her.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I do. Why else were you sent to me last night?"

For a moment she thought she had reached him. Then his face closed against her and he strode off. She had to run to catch up with him.

"I know how you feel," she said, breathlessly, the words falling over each other. "I was like you – I know what it is to be alone."

She told him, then, speaking of things she had thought never to say aloud, telling him of Bill and Sally, the accident, the emptiness, the terrible vacuum.

"But I was wrong," she said. "Hopelessly wrong. I thought my life was finished. I tried to end it. I wanted no more of it. But last night – I discovered something. Living isn't only being with one person. Living is. . . ." She stopped, seeking the words that would pierce the barrier of his silent repudiation. "Living is the sight of the sea. The feel of the wind. The smell of grass. Look! Look at that dog."

Without thinking she put a hand on his arm and pulled him to a standstill.

Across the sand at the edge of the sea a small black dog chased after a seagull. With the ease of disdain, a bare three feet from its pointing nose, the bird lifted on widespread wings. The dog barked. Hysterical excitement sharpened its pace. The gull floated before it, gracing the ten feet of air with a beautiful, gliding swing. The dog paused. Something caught its attention. It swerved sideways and splashed, bouncing through the small waves. The gull floated to the sand, its wings outspread, furling in upon its sleek, fat body.

"See what I mean," she urged, her fingers pressing his arm through his sleeve. "It's lost its dream of catching the gull –

but it knows the truth. There are other things to do. Other things to be happy about. Just bouncing in the water, snapping at driftwood! That's living!"

He turned his head and looked down at her. She was suddenly shy. Her fingers felt out of place. She dropped her hand to her side.

"You mean that I should forget my son and bounce in the sea of life with nothing but a fickle joy in my heart."

"No! No! Of course not!"

A weakness flowed through her at his bitter despair. The long fast was an emptiness within her. Her head felt light. But more than the physical hunger, her heart hungered. She had tried to comfort him and she had failed.

She swung on her heel. "I'm hungry," she said.

He walked at her side. The dog spotted the girl in the scarlet jersey, bicycling along the water's edge, and raced to meet her. The child's voice came to them clear and high as she welcomed her playmate.

"I can't feel what you say," he said, walking at her side. "I'm worried about Boy. Be patient with me."

She looked at their footsteps in the sand, weaving a path along which they retraced their way.

"I need someone," he said.

Someone! Anyone! Me or any other human being!

"Howard will be here after breakfast," she said, cold and impersonal. "We'll go to the garage and see about your car. If it's money your wife wants I suppose the next step is for her to contact you in some way. Then you'll be able to do something."

"You'll stay with me?"

"I don't know. I've got to begin my life again."

"Of course. I've no right to ask you."

His voice was as cold as hers. They walked together with a bare foot of space between them but they were far apart.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS AT THE garage, talking to the proprietor, that something clicked into place in Miranda's mind.

"They were in a car," she exclaimed.

The three men, Warburg, Howard Burke and Michael Sheridan, turned towards her.

"Derek and Rupert," she said, her voice rising. "Last night. Don't you see. It must have belonged to someone else." She looked from one to the other. Her eyes fastened on the blue perplexity in the garage proprietor's, but she spoke to Michael. "Bert knows all the cars round here. His is the only garage in the town." She turned to Michael. "Have you got a photo of your wife?"

Understanding brightened in his gaze. He thrust his hand into his inside breast-pocket and brought out a thick crocodile wallet. Rummaging among some papers he withdrew a small snapshot and handed it to the man.

"Here," he said. "Do you recognise her?"

Warburg took the picture. Cocked his head on one side and studied it gravely.

"Well?" Miranda thrust excitedly. "Do you?"

"Can't say that I do." His head wagged from side to side.

"Are you sure, Bert? Think! It's terribly important."

He stared at the picture in silence. Drew in a loud breath, whistling through his teeth.

"There was a woman yesterday, looked a bit like this one. Her hair was different."

"It would be," Michael said, his voice low. "That's two years old."

"This one was blonde."

"That's nothing," Miranda cried, frustrated, exasperated. "Do you know if she was staying here?"

He looked up at her and shook his head. "Can't say." He gave the snapshot back. "People don't tell me their affairs. Now – about your car, Mr. Sheridan."

Miranda was aware of a sinking sensation. It had seemed as if they might be on the verge of a break-through. It was no use telling herself that it had been a foolish hope, as foolish as the dog's hope of catching the seagull.

She watched Michael return the snapshot to his wallet and moved away, staring at the petrol pumps with unfocusing vision. Her own words of philosophy echoed in her ears. They sounded foolish. Impertinent. How could she have thought they would give him comfort? His son was lost to him.

She knew, then, that she was bound to the man. Until she saw the two of them, father and son, together, she was part of his life.

They drove out along the sea-road. The tram grew rapidly bigger, rising from the wide and placid green of the fields. Howard drew off the road on to the verge. The men got out and examined the car. The front bumper was buckled around the broken post. The radiator broken. The sleek bonnet jarred in bent and ugly metal.

Bert grunted as he examined it. "I'll send the breakdown lorry. You were lucky, Mr. Sheridan, not to be hurt."

"Yes," Michael said, "*I* was lucky."

They turned away from the sad car and got back into Howard's Consul. Back at the garage, Bert climbed out.

Michael said: "It'll be some time before I get my car back."

"It will," Bert nodded.

"Can you hire me one?"

"Well now." Bert's face wrinkled in a broad smile. "I've got nothing like your Bentley."

"Anything will do," Michael said impatiently.

"I've an old Chevrolet. I've been working on it for my son but he's on holiday and won't be back for a week."

Michael got out. "That'll do me fine. If it's all right with you."

"It's round the back."

He moved away. Michael followed. Miranda sat, motionless, forgotten. He stopped after a few steps and looked back at her.

"Is this good-bye, Miranda?"

His voice was impersonal, but something about the set of his jaw belied his tone.

"I should go back to the tram." She spoke reluctantly. There must be some reason she could use to justify staying with him! She leaned out of the window. "I'm a fool!" she cried. "There's *my* car. You can have that! Howard'll drive us to Hastings won't you, Howard?"

"Of course I will."

She veiled her eyes from the light, mocking understanding in his and looked at Michael.

He came back, his face lighting. Bert Warburg followed. He got into the car and slammed the door.

As Howard pressed the starter Bert put a hand on the open window.

"That picture," he said, his brows creasing. "There *was* something. Something the man said."

"The man? There was a man with her?" Michael sat on the edge of the seat.

Bert nodded.

"What did he say?" Miranda urged.

Bert grinned apologetically. "My memory!" He knocked his forehead with a clenched fist. "What was it now? Something about a boat."

"A boat!"

"That's right." His face cleared. "A boat."

"Is it down in the estuary?"

"There you've got me. He said something about getting provisions."

Miranda put her hand on his. "You're wonderful, Bert! I always thought so! Now I know!" She threw back his grin as if it were a ball and turned to Howard. "Let's go!" she cried. "Now we have got something to get our teeth into!"

The estuary stretched before them, dotted with small boats. It was an eighteen foot tide and the waters spread over the ramp and along the road. A man in a navy-blue jersey, his back towards them, sculled lazily across an open space, fifty feet out.

She stood at the edge of the spread of water and called:

"Dobson!" The oars dipped and rose. She cupped her hands to her mouth and called again. "Do-o-obson!"

The oars rested as the man twisted on his hips. Miranda waved, shouting: "Come here. I want to talk to you."

Slowly, maddeningly slowly, he waved a hand in understanding. Slowly, he straightened his body. The oars began their rhythmical dip-and-rise.

Miranda scanned the estuary, shading her eyes against the sun, blinking against the bright dazzle on the still waters. To the left, along the straight line of the wooden mooring path, the small craft floated, serene and quiet. She knew most of them and their owners. Two or three belonged to summer visitors but she had seen them here during the long Sundays she had spent in her own boat with Sally. A faint chugging reached her ears. She narrowed her eyes, looking along the river towards the open sea. In the centre of the sun-glitter she glimpsed the stern of a moving boat. Her eyes watered.

At her side Michael moved restlessly. "He's taking his time."

Miranda glanced at him, smiling. "You can't hurry Dobson. He's a great believer in taking things slow-and-easy!"

But, at last, the prow of his rowing boat grated on the flooded road. With methodical care he shipped his oars. Stood up. Reached for the rope, neatly coiled at the bottom of the boat, and put one wader-covered leg over the edge and into the water. He splashed towards them.

"Nice to see you, Mrs. Miller."

It was the first time she had been here since the accident. In the warmth of his eyes, the gentleness of his slow voice, lay memory of happier days. Long days in the salt wind and the sun on the white cliffs as the boat sped along offshore.

"Nice to see you, Dobson."

He stood, looking from one to the other. His nod included the stranger, Sheridan, as well as the familiar figure of the hotel proprietor.

"Dobson," Miranda began. "We're looking for a woman, blonde, about . . ." She shot a glance at the man on her right.

"Thirty-seven," he said.

Miranda felt surprise. His wife must be several years older than he was.

The statistics went on. His curt voice etched an image on her mind.

"Five foot, four inches. Slender. Blue-eyed. And a man."

"That'll be Mr. and Mrs. Bishop," Dobson said in his slow voice.

A band tightened around Miranda's heart. She felt Michael stiffen as he exclaimed: "They're here!"

"They *were* here," Dobson corrected in his lazy drawl.

"Oh, no!"

Dobson turned and gazed out along the line of the estuary between the flat contours of the land.

"You've only just missed them," he said. "There they go now."

She followed his pointing arm. The boat was a black dot in the dazzle of water where the river's mouth yawned against the sea.

"See," Dobson said. "They're turning now."

Somewhere in the blinding glare, beyond the painful misting of her eyes, she watched the dot lengthen, elongating sideways. She started. It was a familiar shape. High in the prow, it fell away in a graceful sweep back from the cabin to a steady stern. Sunlight blazed from the perspex windows. She closed her eyes, blinking at the tears that were not only the result of the glare.

"They went out on the turn of the tide," Dobson said.

"They were here last night!" Miranda dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her knuckles.

"Aye. Slept on board. To be ready to sail."

She forced her aching eyes to open. Michael stared out to sea. The lines of his face were set in a hard mask. She turned, seeking comfort in the boatman's weather-brown, homely features.

Michael asked, his voice tight as stretched wire. "Were they alone?"

Dobson turned and looked at him. "Aye – all week they were alone." His voice deepened. "A good man, that Mr Bishop. Handles his boat like an expert."

"But that's *your* boat!" Miranda broke in.

"Aye, that's *Regina Rose.*"

"You let them have her?"

A smile lifted the corners of his mouth, wrinkled the lines beside his eyes.

"*My* Rose is getting married at Christmas," he told her.

"Oh, I'm glad!" The conventional words leaped to her lips with genuine pleasure. "Give her my love and best wishes."

"Aye, I will." His smile possessed his face.

Michael's voice cut the ribbon of pleasantries. "You rented your boat to Mr. Bishop."

"Yes, sir, I did. He offered me good money."

"I'll bet he did! Easy come – easy go!"

"I wouldn't know. . . ."

Again, Michael snapped at him. "Where are they going?"

Dobson's face settled into a sullen antipathy. "Can't say."

Before Miranda could stop him, Michael thrust a hand in his pocket and withdrew a pound note. "Perhaps this'll help you to talk."

Dobson looked straight into his face. "Mr. Bishop paid me in advance. It's none of my business to ask where he's going."

"For God's sake, man – you must have some idea."

Dobson shrugged his shoulders.

Michael drew in a quick breath. He thrust the hand with the note back into his pocket and his face softened in a pleading smile.

"If you know, tell me. It's very important to me."

"So it seems." Dobson was unmoved.

Miranda took a step forwards. "Please, Dobson."

He turned his eyes to hers. She shrank from the unfamiliar coldness in his manner but she tried again. "It really *is* important to us," she urged.

"And I really can't say. The tank's full. There's ten gallons aboard in cans. Could be anywhere along the coast. Could be across the Channel."

Michael took a few quick steps to the edge of the water. His shoes were sole deep but he didn't move. The boat had gone beyond the angle of the land. In all the space of the river and sea nothing moved.

Miranda asked: "But you're sure they're alone?"

"They were alone. Until last night."

Michael swung round. "Last night? What happened?"

"I've got an idea their son was with them."

"Their son!" Michael's voice was hoarse. "Did you see him?"

Dobson shook his head slowly. "I did – and I didn't."

Miranda saw Michael's fists clench at his side, felt the effort of his control as he urged: "Go on!"

"It was like this. I was in The Bell." His finger gestured at the low pub at their backs. "They drove up around ten. His hand gestured again. "That's their car. I'm looking after it . . ."

She broke in. "The boy! Did you see him?"

"Well, I did and I didn't."

Something exploded within her. "Dobson," she cried. "Stop this! *Did* you see the boy?"

Dobson was unruffled. "It's dark here at nights. Only the one lamp. I was in the bar, playing darts. I heard the car and looked through the window. It seemed as if I saw a boy with them. He must've been mighty tired for Mr. Bishop lifted him from the car and carried him to the dinghy while Mrs. Bishop locked up and came to give me the key."

"You didn't ask her," Michael cried.

"What should I ask Mrs. Bishop?"

"About the child! Couldn't you see he was being . . .?" His voice was caught between the clamp of his jaw.

"Being what?" Dobson asked in bland surprise.

Michael stared at him with vacant eyes. In the silence the lap of the water seemed to grow loud.

"Didn't you think it strange that they should suddenly acquire a child? Bring him down here at night? Carry him aboard?"

Dobson's head moved majestically as he rose to his full height.

"It wasn't none of my business," he announced. He turned to Miranda. "Now, if you've finished with me – I've got to see to the ropes."

"Yes, we've no more questions." She forced her dry lips

into a smile. "And thank you, Dobson. You've been a great help."

"I do what I can," he said. "For everyone."

As he turned and began to splash back through the water's edge, Miranda called: "Don't forget my message."

"I won't." He pushed the rowing boat to deeper water, clambered in and called over his shoulder: "I've seen to *The Roving Swan.* She's all right when you want her."

"Thank you."

His oars came out. Dipped into the water. The boat swung slowly round.

Michael snapped: "Let's get out of here."

As she turned he was already striding away from her. She watched him, feeling very small, angry and frustrated. All last night the child had been here while they were in the hotel a bare four miles away. If only they'd known!

The door of the car slammed. She saw him light a cigarette. A hand touched her elbow. She jumped. She had forgotten Howard.

"Miranda –"

"Yes?"

"I don't like it."

She gave him a watery smile. "Nor do I!"

"That's not what I mean." His head shook sideways, his fingers pressed the flesh of her upper arm where it was bare below the short sleeve. "I don't like you being involved in all this."

"I'm all right." She tried to disengage her arm but he gripped the tighter. "What are you worrying about, Howard? It's not my problem."

"You're making it yours. That man Sheridan is dangerous."

She laughed aloud. "Don't be silly!"

He hurried on, his voice low and pleading: "Not on purpose, I agree. But he carries danger with him. He's too intense. Too damnably self-willed."

Miranda looked at the profile in the car and her heart turned over.

"I know, Howard," she said quietly. "I know. It's sweet of you to . . ." She paused.

He leaped in. "Be afraid for you? You're right! I am!"

In spite of the warm sun, she shivered. "In a way, I think I'm afraid, too," she admitted. Her voice strengthened. "But even fear is better than being dead."

"Dead!"

She turned and gave him a steady look.

"I tried to kill myself. Michael saved me."

Howard's eyes softened. "I guessed it was something like that." His fingers relaxed their grip but he didn't let her go. "You must do what you have to do. But – be careful. Don't let him use your gratitude."

"It's not gratitude!"

"Are you sure?"

Her eyes faltered. She looked down at the gravel beneath their feet.

"He's a man with great charm," Howard said. "Right now you need him. I can see that. But, remember, he's a man with a purpose. There's something ruthless beneath all that charm."

Her eyes swung up, antagonistic. "You don't understand."

"Oh, yes, I do, my dear. I understand you very well. I've known you a long time. And I don't want to see you hurt. You've had your quota!"

"Oh, Howard!" A lump filled her throat.

From the car, Michael called: "Aren't you coming?"

She smiled at him. "Right now."

Howard held her as she moved. "Just remember – if you need me – I'm always here."

She gave him a wary look.

"Don't worry!" he said lightly, laughing at her. "I'm not in love with you. But I do love you."

"Bless you for that!" Her own laugh was shaky.

"And you'll remember what I said?"

"I will."

"Right! Let's go and get your car."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HOURS lengthened behind them. Long hours. Odd moments stood out, scattered along the empty day like berries on a leafless branch.

On the way to Hastings they stopped and climbed the stone steps up on to the sea-wall. A breeze blew warm air against them as they stood, looking out to sea.

The boat was scarcely visible. It stood far out. Even as they watched it seemed to be getting smaller.

Miranda glanced at Michael and looked, instantly, away. She sought for words but there was nothing she could say. It seemed a hopeless quest. Was he wrong? Shouldn't he contact the police? They would be in a position to keep a watch on the harbours. She and Michael, alone, had no way of covering the many places along the coast where the boat might put in. Still less, had they any chance of discovering *Regina Rose* if she sailed across the Channel.

As if he felt her thought, he said: "I can't do it. Not yet. I must keep on waiting. She'll have to contact me to get the money. . . ."

They were in the car-park in Hastings.

Howard said: "Back to the grindstone!"

His car swung away. He turned once and waved. A trickle of cold water ran down her spine. The fight had flowed into the morning Events had followed quickly, close on each other's heels. Except for the pre-breakfast walk, Howard had been with them.

Now, she was alone with Michael Sheridan.

What did she really know about him?

In the tram he had been as tender as a woman with her sickness. In the juke-box clamour of the coffee bar he had produced a flash of violence. And cold courage in the face of the flick-knife. On the beach he had, momentarily, broken. There had been fear, uncertainty, an inner weakness. By the river's swollen flood he had been domineering to the point of

arrogance. In all these times he had seemed to be in need of her. He had said as much. Was her belief in him justified? Or were her critical faculties blurred by the fact that he had brought her back to life?

Was he – dangerous? Certainly, as far as the child, Boy, was concerned he was both vulnerable and ruthless. Would he be ruthless towards herself if the time came when she was no longer necessary to him?

"Well? What do you think of me?"

His voice cut across her thoughts. She blushed, realising that she had been staring at him.

"Let's go."

He got into the car at her side. Covering her embarrassment, she asked lightly: "What now?"

His body slumped. He passed a hand over his eyes.

"I can't seem to think."

The uneasy questions flowed away on a flood of compassion.

"Bed for you," she said.

She braced herself for arguments. None came. It was as if he had reached a nadir of emotionless exhaustion and yielded himself to her will. She wanted to take his head in her arms, hold him close, blot out the unrelenting image of his lost child.

She turned the key in the lock, pressed the starter.

On the drive he sat so still, eyes closed, she thought he slept.

Sweeping along the sea-road she saw that his car had gone. The fence was jagged and torn. Along the road, coming towards them, she saw the farmer's car. His hand came out of the window, signalling, but she didn't stop. Waving a cheery greeting she pressed her foot on the accelerator. . . .

There was no message at the hotel desk. No message in his room.

He swayed on his feet. His hand brushed his chin.

"I need a shave."

"You do!" She laughed. "Is your suitcase in your car?"

He nodded.

"I'll get it for you."

"You're a wonderful person, Miranda."

"Of course!" She laughed it off. "Aren't we all?"

He looked into her eyes, unsmiling. She saw his impulse to

kiss her and her own lips parted as she drew in a tremulous breath. His arms reached for her but she stepped back, holding the door to support herself.

"No – no –"

A shadow fell across his face. He turned and strode to the window.

"Michael –" Her voice faltered.

"Yes?"

"Don't misunderstand me."

"You make yourself very clear."

"But I don't! I – I want you to kiss me."

His shoulders went taut but he didn't turn.

"Feminine logic!" His laugh was abrupt. "You want it so you say 'no'. Or is it that you're playing hard-to-get? You disappoint me. I thought more of you."

She was trembling. Her legs felt weak beneath her.

"I said no," she cried, "because it's all too easy for you."

"Easy!"

He swung round and stared at her across the width of the room. She shrank from the suppressed violence in his voice. At the same time she knew that it was the power within him that drew her towards him. For four years she had lived only for her daughter. There had been work – and Sally. Since Bill's death she hadn't let herself have any contact with another man. Hadn't wanted any.

Now, faced with Sheridan's forceful masculinity, she was confused by the strength of her own reaction.

"Maybe it isn't easy for either of us," she said. "I don't know. We've come too close – too quickly. Last night you were sorry for me. I don't want that kind of kiss."

"I'm not sorry for you now."

His eyes held hers. She quivered beneath the intensity of his look.

"Do you love me?"

"Oh, Miranda, you're a woman, not a girl! I don't know if I love you. I *do* know that I want to kiss you."

He began to move towards her. She dropped her arms to her sides and waited for him. He stood in front of her, not touching her, looking down into her upturned face. He bent

his head. Lightly as a butterfly's wing his lips touched hers.

The flame of life swept up within her. Her whole being seemed to flow out of her at the place of contact where his mouth brushed hers. His arms went round her. One held her close. The other pushed the door. Her mind went blank, thought consumed by the fires that burned her.

The light slam of the door was a cold knife in her back. Was this what she wanted? A quickly finished moment of passion in a hotel bedroom? She knew that she *did* want it. All of her, body and spirit, cried aloud for the warm, sweet darkness of his embrace. She yielded to his pressure, rubbing her cheek against the stubble of his beard, rejoicing in the sharp scratch of pain.

He moved. His arm around her, drawing her with him across the room. Her eyes opened. She saw the bed, the cover stretched white and neat across its surface. She looked up at his face through a sudden, blinding rush of tears.

"Miranda –"

"Not yet –" Her voice broke but she stood away from him. "Not like this –"

She spun on her heel and ran, blindly, from his room. From the weakness within her that wanted to stay. From the sweet darkness in his eyes that drew her towards him.

From another moment of contact between his lips and hers that would surely destroy the last possibility of awareness.

He called her name, once. Covering her ears with her hands she fled into the security of her own room. She locked the door and waited, trembling.

He didn't come. . . .

After a lonely lunch she drove to the garage and fetched his suitcase. Leaving it with the porter at the hotel she got back into her car.

The afternoon stretched before her. She must get away. The thought of him, asleep in his room, was a magnet. The thought of how it would be if she went and knocked on his door was a longing so intense that she started the car and was moving out of the hotel grounds before she was aware of the action. She stared at the road with unfocusing eyes. Suddenly, she knew what she would do.

She drove fast. An hour later the bonnet of the Hillman nosed down the steep ramp to the garage. The engine died.

It was strange to be back. The house that had been her home was silent. She turned the key and went in. The familiar hall seemed unreal. It wasn't only that she looked at it with eyes that had, yesterday, decided never to see it again, she knew that she would never live here again. It seemed smaller. Without substance. Her fingers touched the carved oak table but it had the texture of water.

She went upstairs.

Sally's picture beside Bill's looked at her from the wall. The intolerable anguish she had felt was an emotion she remembered but could no longer feel. She saw the woman she had been as if she looked at another person.

"I'm sorry." She spoke aloud in final relinquishment.

The two faces returned her look without change. Smiling, they hung on the wall. There was absolution in their timeless patience.

A feeling of peace came over her. She went to the wardrobe and selected three dresses. In a few short minutes she had packed the suitcase she got from the cupboard in the hall.

With a final, embracing glance, she went from her bedroom. The door clicked behind her. She ran lightly down the stairs and closed the front door.

The garden was ablaze with roses. She broke one from its stem and held it to her face. The sun-warm fragrance pierced her senses. The petals were velvet-soft. She thrust the suitcase on the back seat of her car, slid beneath the wheel and placed the crimson rose at her side.

She went to the agent and put her house on his list. She arranged for the auctioneer to take over the sale of her furniture. Back in the car again she looked at the rose and drew in a deep breath.

It was over. She had cut the strings of her past. There was no way of knowing what the future held, but she was free to go forward. . . .

The sun was setting as she drove into the hotel grounds. The air shimmered, golden. Last night, the sunset had been a tempestuous cauldron. Tonight it was like walking through an

apricot-coloured fairy story. The hotel walls, the sweep of grass, the wide-branched oak-tree, the beds of roses, all were washed with the ethereal glow. As if a small child, in love with the single colour had swept a brushful of paint across the whole picture.

As she walked across the yard she felt her body light as air. Little tendrils of anticipation twined around her. She would see him. Be with him. It was no longer a matter of importance what he might feel towards herself. She wanted, only, to be with him. To be able to fill her eyes with the sight of him. To feel life leap within her in his presence.

She glanced round the hall. His suitcase had gone. She hurried up the stairs, excited as a young girl, and went into her own room, passing the closed door to his.

Her face in the mirror was touched with the glow of the sunset. Her eyes were bright, the lines of strain smoothed away.

She opened the suitcase, took out her washing things and went to the bathroom. In a few minutes she was bathed. Back in her room, she sprayed perfume over her body. Fresh underclothes were followed by a dress of periwinkle blue.

The afterglow still hung in the room as she finished her face. She stood in front of the long mirror and examined the effect. Satisfied, she reached for her handbag and turned towards the door.

Something caught her attention. A small triangle of white protruded from the edge of the carpet. Her heart missed a beat.

She bent and pulled at the paper. It was an envelope. She stared at the blank face of it, not wanting to open it. With an effort she forced her fingers to move. The paper was cheap, lined. The writing was childish. There was no signature. Her eyes scanned the words.

"If you want to know – come to the tram."

How long had the note been here? She tried to think. Had it stuck out of the carpet when she came back. She couldn't remember. Her thoughts had been full of Michael.

Michael! She held the note in one hand and opened her door. The passage was shadowy. She hurried through the dimness and knocked, softly. There was no answer. She knocked

again, loud and firm. The silence grated on her nerves. She knew, as if she could see through the door, the emptiness of the room.

She swung round and ran down the stairs. The hall was lighted. A chatter of voices came from the cocktail bar. She walked quickly to the entrance and scanned the crowded room.

He wasn't there.

She went into the resident's lounge. It was empty except for an elderly couple, the man reading the evening paper, the woman knitting.

Where could he be?

She stood, lost, suddenly afraid. The woman eyed her with curiosity. She turned and went back into the hall, to the reception desk.

The porter was on the phone. One foot tapped a staccato beat on the polished floor as she waited. At last he finished.

"Have you seen Mr. Sheridan?" she asked.

The porter smiled. "He went out."

"Out?" Her pulse jerked. "When?"

"About an hour ago."

"Did he leave a message for me?"

"No, Mrs. Miller."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No, he didn't."

"Did anyone come for him?"

"He had a telephone call."

"Was it a girl?"

"A man."

She hesitated while her thoughts raced. Was her note anything to do with the phone call that had taken him out? Had his wife left someone on shore to contact him?

The porter's voice pierced her consciousness. "I'm sorry. I can't help you, Mrs. Miller."

"That's all right."

She moved away, the questions fluttering in the cage of her head. Had Michael gone before her to the tram? Why the tram? His wife wouldn't even know about it. Why had he left

no message for her? Was he, now, rejecting her, as she had rejected him?

Beneath the surface of her skin, the ends of her nerves were raw. There was only one thing to do. She must follow her only lead.

Outside, dusk was deepening. The afterglow had gone. Across the lawn the oak-tree crouched over its own dark shadow, the white roses gleamed, the darker ones faded.

She ran to her car. Switching the key, pressing the starter, she didn't see her own red rose, dying in the darkness. As the car leaped forwards it slid back on the seat, into the crevice.

She sped through the town and out on to the road. In the twilight it was easier to see without headlamps. Afraid to think, she concentrated on the half-hour's driving ahead of her.

It was as she swung round the corner on to the sea-road that a sudden burst of noise from a side-lane sprang upon her. She started. The car swung as she looked into the rear mirror. Two long, low shapes swept out of the turning on to the road. Light blazed in at the back window as the motor-cycles roared up, close on her tail.

Although she could see nothing beyond the glare of light, she knew it was Derek and Rupert. Anger swallowed her fear.

"Idiots!" she cried aloud. "Don't ride so close!"

She put her foot down on the accelerator, trying to draw away. The glare faded for an instant, then flooded up again. It was difficult to see. She switched on her own headlamps. Glanced at the speedometer. Seventy-five swung up to eighty. And still they clung to her tail.

In a few moments she would have to slow down if she wasn't to sweep past the tram. She stuck a hand out of the window and thrust it down-and-up in an urgent command. Her answer was a prolonged blare on a horn. The noise drummed in her head. It was a nightmare. Was this how Michael had felt last night, with the car pressing him forwards? Panic fired her blood. Would they force *her* off the road? Into the ditch?

"No! Damn you!" she swore aloud, her voice lost in the thunderous roar. "If anyone's to be killed – it won't be me!"

She went rigid. The lights were brighter. The crescendo of

the motor-cycle engines drowned the low hum of her own. They were going to pass. She drew in a little towards the left and realised, with a stab of absolute terror, that one light was on the nearside. Her hands gripped the steering wheel as, in the same moment, she saw the lights of another car sweeping along the straight road towards her.

It was unexpectedly near. Concentrating on the roar and blaze at her rear, she hadn't been aware of what lay ahead.

The motor-cycles were abreast of her. A quick glance from side to side showed her the black-jacketed, helmeted figures. On the nearside cycle, hair blowing, wild of face, behind the forward pressing helmet, she glimpsed Polly. The image bit into her brain as her eyes fled back to the road.

The headlamps of the approaching car dipped. In automatic response, she dipped her own. The lights of the cycles at her sides blazed forwards. The roar of their engines filled her head with an avalanche of sound.

She slammed on her brakes and the car leaped beneath her hands. Her wrists ached as she clung to the wheel. Simultaneously, the cycles roared past. The approaching car was almost abreast. She didn't realise that she held her breath as she waited for the head-on crash.

In a split second, the cycle on her right swerved in front of her. For an instant she was blinded by the lights of the other car as it swept past. Then, in the lights of her own headlamps, she saw the cycles and their riders. Polly's head was twisted on her shoulders. Her mouth was stretched, the white teeth gleamed, the eyes blazed with a mad excitement. Above the diminishing roar of the cycles, Miranda seemed to hear the girl's wild laughter.

The tram was just ahead. Miranda was too close to stop. As the cycles roared away, she drew to a standstill. Backed, slowly, on to the verge. Doused lights and engine. Her body was wet. She sat, motionless, her hands pressed together, the whole of her a pricking dampness. The noise of the cycles was no more than a faint drumming in the air. Their lights were diminishing will-o'-the-wisps.

A violent trembling possessed her. She held her body still, waiting for the paroxysm to pass.

At last, she was able to move. She got out of the car and stood, shakily, at its side, breathing deeply at the fresh, sweet air, feeling its warmth on her cold body.

The tram crouched in the darkness. She looked at its shadowy outline and didn't want to go towards it. The words of the note were like pieces of elastic tightening between her reluctant body and the waiting, silent tram.

She yielded to the persistent pressure. Her knees were like water as she walked along the rutted path. On the stile, for a moment, she was unable to move. Exerting her will, she swung her leg over and clambered down. Trembling, she stumbled up the grass slope. Mounted the wooden stairs.

Her eyes had grown accustomed to the light that still fell from the pale sky. Before she opened her handbag she saw the glint on the key in the lock. She stared at it, transfixed. Someone had used the spare key she kept on a nail at the back of the tram. Had used it to go in.

To do – what?

The loneliness of the empty, darkening fields rose up around her. It was difficult to breathe. Her hand went to her throat as if she were suffocating..

A low, faint sound reached her. The breath stopped in her lungs. She strained to hear. It came again. A long-drawn moan that mingled with the drumming of her own blood in her ears. Her breath rushed out of the pain in her lungs. The faint whistle of it startled her from the paralysing fear.

She slid the door sideways. It was dark inside the tram. But not too dark.

He lay on her bed, his face a white oval in which his eyes were two black hollows.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"MICHAEL!"

She knelt on the floor in the narrow space between the beds.

"It's all right." He gave her a wry smile. "They didn't intend to kill me!" His hand reached out for hers.

"Kill you!" The strip of plaster she had put on his head gleamed dully against the blackness of his hair. "Who? What happened?"

He raised his head and gave an involuntary cry of pain.

"Lie still." She put a hand, lightly, on his forehead.

"Give me a cigarette."

Taking her hand from his she slid it into his pocket. Through his shirt she felt the warmth of his body. Quickly, she drew back, opened the case and put a cigarette between his lips. In the flame of the lighter she searched his face for visible signs of violence. There were none.

Only a little relieved, she sat back on her heels. Her whole being cried out for answers to her questions but she only said, her laugh shaky: "It looks like time for more coffee."

His hand caught hers again. "Don't go away, Miranda."

"It's not far."

"It's too far."

She watched the end of his cigarette glow red. For an instant his mouth came to life in the shadows of his face. Her fingers twisted in his.

"Tell me, Michael."

"I had a phone call."

"I know. The porter told me. Who was it from?"

"I've no idea! A man just said: 'There's a car outside. It'll take you where you'll hear something that is important to you.'"

"Did you recognise the voice?"

"No. The car was there. I got in. The driver didn't speak. He brought me here. Dropped me and drove back the way we had come. I looked round but there was no sign of anyone. Only the sheep in the field. I was angry. It seemed a poor kind of practical joke to strand me here, leave me to walk back. Then, I thought of you." His hand tightened.

"Me?"

"My ex-wife seems to be fully acquainted with all my movements." In the deepening darkness his voice was disembodied. "If she did anthing to you. . . ." His voice died.

A tingle seemed to lift the hair on her scalp. "Why should she do anything to me?"

He didn't answer. The cigarette glowed. He began to speak. Stopped. Began again.

"I was confused. I decided to look in the tram before I left. The key was in the door. I should have known better! I opened the door. It was empty – but with an unnatural feeling. I came in, through the kitchen. As I got in here, something moved at my side. I swung round. It was that young man, last night, the blond."

"Derek!"

"That's the one."

The cigarette emitted its rosy circle as she waited.

"He stood there, by the table, grinning at me. I asked him what the devil he was playing at. He clicked his finger and thumb in my face and said, 'Kicks, Daddy-o! Kicks!' I lost my head. I went for him. Got him by the neck. I remember thinking how thin it felt. He was choking. Suddenly, I came too. I let go and he slumped on to the chair."

He stopped. Miranda urged, impatiently. "What then?"

"I was looking at him. His face was contorted but I saw a quick gleam of excitement in his eyes. As I turned something hit me – on the back of my head. I came to on this bed."

"It must've been Rupert."

"I guess so."

"But why?"

"I imagine they took umbrage at my actions last night."

"It doesn't make sense." She shook her head. "Why would they get you out here? Why bother with me? Do you think your wife would set them on to you?"

"I doubt it! She wants me alive!" He was silent a moment and then he said, puzzled: "What *I* don't understand is why I haven't heard from her."

"Maybe she's letting you sweat it out."

"It's not like her."

"What about Mr. Bishop?"

He drew in a long breath. In the darkness it was unnaturally loud. Miranda realised that her cramped legs were full of pins-and-needles. Painfully, she rose to her feet.

"I'm going to make coffee now," she said. "Where did I put my handbag?"

"If you want a light, here's my lighter."

His hand was white in the darkening shadows. She took the lighter. She was moving away when he spoke her name. Something in his voice sent a shiver of emotion down her spine.

"Yes?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry." The words were curt.

"About what?"

"All of this."

"All of it?" she murmured.

"Not for myself." His voice was curt. "I wanted to make love to you this morning. You're a very attractive young woman – and I'm a man! But I kicked myself when you'd gone. Damn it! I'm no good at apologising!"

She said softly into the darkness, her fingers twisting the lighter round and round: "You weren't the only one. I wanted you to make love to me. But I couldn't." Her laugh was low and tremulous. "I suppose I'm still romantic enough to like the trimmings." She heard him move, begin to speak, and hurried on: "Don't say any more. When this is all over – when I've had time to get used to living again – when we're both a bit calmer. . . ."

She snapped the lighter and bent over the oil-lamp. The tram filled slowly with a golden effulgence. She turned towards him. He was in the process of sitting up. Something white fluttered to the ground as he moved.

He bent to pick it up and groaned. "My head's the size of a pumpkin!" His fingers touched the back of his head. "Quite a lump!" he laughed. "Rupert wasn't playing!"

She stooped and retrieved the paper. It was the same cheap, lined paper that she had received. She held it out to him.

"Read it," he grunted. "I'll bet it's no love letter!"

She spread it out. The writing was scrawled, hugely, across the page, disregarding the lines.

She read aloud in a small, tight voice: "Let this be a warning to you, Daddy-o. Don't tangle with us again. Next time it might be your girl who's on the receiving end."

She raised her eyes. The paper hung from her fingers. His face was grey, his mouth drawn into a hard line.

"It's nice," she said softly, "to be called 'your girl'."

He didn't answer. Only stared at her with a fixed and angry despair.

"Whatever I do," he cried, "it's always like this! What is it with me – that I bring nothing but trouble to those around me?"

"It's not your fault," she said, but Howard's words beat inside her head. *He carries danger with him.*

He stood up and took the single step that separated them. His hands gripped her shoulders.

"You've got to stay out of this."

Her eyes were steady. "It's too late. I'm already in."

"You can go away."

"Leave you?"

"You must! I've got enough to worry about with Boy."

Her heart turned over. "Do you want me to go?"

"I want you to be safe."

"There are dangers worse than a hit on the head. I don't want to sound monotonous, but I'd be dead without you."

"You could be dead with me!" His voice was sharp, his eyes dark with a desperate hopelessness.

"That – I wouldn't mind."

His lips tightened. His hands slid up her neck and cupped her face.

"But *I* would. Miranda –" His voice softened. "Please, I beg you, go away. Until it's over. I'll come to you then."

She smiled up at his face so close to hers and shook her head.

"Don't be so serious!" she teased, and lifted herself on her toes to give him a quick kiss. "You're stuck with me! You must make the best of it!" His arms tightened around her.

"When we've got your son back you can tell me to go. Until then, you're wasting your time in asking."

He held her from him and looked down at her.

"I've never met anyone like you." His laugh was, suddenly, light. "Funny, how terrific the best clichés are!" One hand stroked the hair from her forehead.

A small pulse beat in her throat. "That makes two of us."

He drew her close and she rested against his chest. The drumming of his heart was loud. Too loud. She stiffened.

Lifted her head. The silence quivered beneath the onslaught of rising noise. Like the crash of wind through high branches it rolled upon them, reverberating.

"They're coming back!"

He moved quickly to the open door. "This time I'm ready for them!"

She found herself at his side. Through the darkness two lights raced towards them along the road. Fear was a spear-point, rushing at them on the points of the headlamps.

"Quick," she cried, her hand in his. "Into the fields. They'll never find us there."

He didn't look at her. "Not likely!" His voice was thick with angry excitement. There was violence in it.

"Michael! Please!"

She tugged at his hand but he shook her off.

"Do you want me to run from those bullies?" he cried.

"Yes, yes, I do!"

"Then you've got the wrong man!"

The terror cleared. Her mind was suddenly hard as steel. "If you want to play the hero –"

He broke in. "Oh, I'm no hero! But I've an account to settle with those two young men." His hand touched the back of his head. "Besides," his voice was harsh, "there's Boy. I've *got* to know if they're in it."

She tore her eyes from the hypnotic lights. His face was in profile, his jaw set in a firm, cold fury. His whole body was poised, balanced on the springboard of anger.

Some of his fierce and taut determination spilled out of him and whipped her own blood into a throbbing excitement. A fierce pride swept through her. Her head came up as she turned back to face the menace of the roaring engines.

The semi-circle of light was a scythe cutting the black night, reaching out to slice at the tram. She waited for the moment when the cycles would slow down. Her eyes ached beneath the blaze. Her head rocked with noise.

Suddenly, the motor-cycles were level with the tram. Suddenly, they were past. Darkness. She saw the hunched figures, the blowing of Polly's hair, silhouetted against the spray of light on the road ahead.

The silence rolled back, louder than the crashing roar of their passing.

Her nerves stretched to the point of seizure. Her legs gave way. She abandoned herself to relief. Moving backwards, she sank on to the chair.

After a while he turned and looked at her.

"Now it's time for the hero's speech!" he mocked between thin lips.

"You said you were no hero." Her own voice sounded unreal. It was all of it touched with a feeling of unreality. His present mocking added the final touch to a world grown insubstantial.

He struck a devil-may-care attitude, leaning against the open door, his big body filling the narrow space, the darkness looming up behind him. When he spoke it was with an audacious levity. "Gee, honey, I sure was scared!" He pointed a finger at her. "Don't let any man kid you he ain't afraid. He sure is! *I* was. I ain't ashamed to admit it!" The bravado fell from him. His shoulders hunched and his voice dropped so low she scarcely caught the words. "But I *am* ashamed. I should be looking after you. I shouldn't have made you run the risk I was prepared to take."

"They wouldn't do anything to me!"

She tried to laugh but it caught in her throat as she was, momentarily, back in her car, the motor-cycles thundering on either side, Polly's wildly exultant face leaping at her out of the twilight.

She stood up. The windows behind their frail curtains, the dark fields, the isolation of the tram, everything that had meant security were, now, causes for apprehension.

"I need a drink," she said. "Let's go back to the hotel."

They sat on stools at the bar. She felt the beginning of a headache. It throbbed at the back of her eyes. She wanted to get drunk. To go on sitting in the crowded, smoky, noisy room swallowing gin-and-martini until she floated away on wings of blissful insensibility.

But she couldn't. Not while she saw the strained and anxious suspense in every line of his unrelaxing body.

She asked, suddenly: "Have you a photo of your son?"

His eyes came round to hers. "Why?"

"I'd like to know what he looks like."

His mouth softened. A lock of hair had fallen over his brows. It gave him a childish look. He took his wallet from his pocket and produced a snapshot.

She looked at it, placing it on the bar. A heart-shaped face, sensitive lips, wide eyes set in thick lashes. A face that tugged at her heart-strings.

"He's fair!"

"My mother was fair."

"He doesn't take after you."

"No. He's the image of my mother. Emotionally as well as physically. Strange how these things can miss a generation."

Miranda slid the snapshot along the bar and looked at the man with new eyes. He had seemed so solitary, had come into her life without background. It was an odd sensation to visualise him with parents. With a home.

"Of course!" Impulsively she put a hand on his arm. "How stupid we are! You should have gone home! The message will be there!"

For a moment, hope lit his eyes. Instantly, it died. She pressed her fingers into his arm, sustaining her own belief with urgent words.

"Why not? Isn't that the natural place for your wife to contact you?"

He finished his drink and ordered two more before he answered.

"She knew I would be driving along that road last night," he said slowly. "She must be having me followed."

"It might not be like that. What had you been doing?"

"Lecturing."

"Where?"

"In Brighton."

"You see!" She was exultant. "Anyone could've known."

"Of course!" His voice deepened again. "She worked out the time I'd finish. She knew when I'd be on my way home."

A pang of disquiet touched her. She ignored it, forcing her-

self to ask with an ease she didn't feel: "You still live in the same house?"

His eyes flashed understanding. "I do," he said gently. "It's a beautiful house. I saw no reason to give her the satisfaction of making me leave it."

"Is it near here?"

"About three miles along the coast."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

The barman put their drinks in front of them. Michael paid and drained his in a single draught.

"Let's go," she urged. "It's better than doing nothing!"

She swallowed her own drink and slid from the stool. As they got into the car she was aware of a quickening interest. She would see the place where he lived. Maybe, one day, it might be *her* home.

Apart from directing her, he didn't speak. In a short while she drove in between wide iron gates. The metal gleamed in the light of her headlamps and fell away to reveal a curving drive between a double row of poplars. The car came out on to an open space. The house was dark. She put her foot on the brake.

"Do you live alone?" she asked.

"I expect Mrs. O'Keefe is at the back. Don't stop. Go on through that gate."

She changed gear. The gate was set in a long brick wall. It was shut. She slowed.

"Go on."

For an instant she thought his mind had given way and then, as the bonnet of the car neared the white gate, it swung slowly open.

"Like the films!" she laughed.

"I'm a sucker for gadgets. Lazy, too! Anything to save effort!"

Miranda put her foot on the brake beneath a wide portico. Her breath caught. The moon was just below the horizon of the sea. The sky shimmered like the opalescent heart of a shell. The lawns fell away from a broad terrace. To one side, each flatly curving branch outlined in black velvet against the in-

candescent background of sky and sea, was a single, enormous fir-tree.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. "A dream –"

"Do you wonder that I wouldn't give it up?"

"If it were mine I'd never go away! Never!" She felt a blush sweep up in her cheeks and opened the door at her side. "Let's find Mrs. O'Keefe," she said.

The slam of the car doors made two staccato sounds in the stillness. She followed him, her feet crunching on the gravel. In the soft wash of light she saw that the house was Georgian. It stood in serenity, the big windows pools of pellucid silver. Instinctively, she walked softly, not wanting to disturb the beauty and the peace.

His key was in the lock as she reached his side. The door opened. Light came on. She blinked and went before him, into a high, wide hall. She stood, feeling the atmosphere with stretched attention. The house was quiet. Deep in stillness. On a carved oak chest stood a vase of white roses. A silver tray with a pile of letters.

Her breath stopped. In the angle immediately above her a woman stood, looking down, watching Michael's back. Above the high neckline of a black dress her face was thin, the skin white in the glare of the central chandelier. Her eyes were bright with antipathy and the smile on her wide-stretched lips was without humour.

As if the woman felt her look, the eyes came round. Instantly, the expression changed. It was as if the look had never been there and her face had changed into a cloth mask.

Miranda shivered. The woman moved. She came down the stairs, without a sound. In her floor-length black dress it was like the gliding of a mechanical doll. Her hands folded in front of her, she reached the hall as Michael turned.

"Oh, Mr. Sheridan –" Her voice was rich with brogue. "You're back! I was so worried last night when I heard nothing from you."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. O'Keefe."

"And the young master? Where's he?"

"He's staying with a school friend."

"Is he now! That's nice for him. Such a lonely boy. I didn't know he had friends."

Miranda listened to the exchange with quivering nerves. The warm concern in the woman's voice was in sharp contrast to the stiffness of the gaunt body. After that first piercing glance the woman ignored her, but Miranda's eyes were fixed on the gargoyle face. Although it had the unreality of a nightmare from which she had just woken, she couldn't dispel the memory of the antagonism that had been directed towards Michael's impervious back.

One thought was hard and clear. Mrs. O'Keefe hated Michael. But why? And, if she did, had she had anything to do with the kidnapping? A feeling of hopelessness washed over her. At every turn she and Michael were faced with inexplicable enmity.

Michael was asking: "Are these the only letters for me?"

"I always leave your letters on the tray." Mrs. O'Keefe drew herself, impossibly, straighter.

"I know you do," Michael snapped. "But are you sure?"

The woman's face was the epitomy of outraged pride.

"Are you suggesting that I'd hide one of your letters, Mr. Sheridan?"

"I'm expecting something that isn't here."

"Maybe you'd like to search my room."

Miranda scarcely heard his protestations. It was, surely, odd that Mrs. O'Keefe should mention her room? Almost as if she were afraid and rushed in, in righteous resentment, to forestall the idea. She knew that she must get into that room. Her gaze raked the landings above her and returned to the two figures in the hall.

"Michael," she said quietly, breaking in on them. "I'm awfully hungry. I wonder if Mrs. O'Keefe could get us something to eat."

She braced herself for the woman's look. Smiling blandly, she held the piercing brightness of the black eyes that swept round at her.

"An egg would do," she said lightly.

"There's cold chicken." Mrs. O'Keefe was cool, unsmiling,

as she turned back to the man and accused: "I had it hot for you and Master Boy last night."

Michael said it with forced brightness: "That'll be fine."

The woman didn't look at her again. Straight as a poker she glided round the end of the staircase and vanished into the shadows beneath the overhanging balcony.

Miranda waited until the door shut behind her. Turning to Michael, she almost laughed at his look of bewilderment.

"Don't ask me why," she said, going close to him, speaking with concentrated urgency. "Just show me which is her room."

The bewilderment increased. "Her room?"

"Feminine instinct," Miranda smiled. "As an author you know all about that!"

"I'm still wary of it!"

"Wary or not, we're wasting time."

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged, yielding. "Follow me."

He went quickly up the stairs. Her feet made no sound on the thick carpet but she paused to lean over the banister and confirm that the door to what was presumably the kitchen was closed.

At the top, Michael turned to his left. She ran after him. He walked a few paces and stopped with his hand on the handle. As she came close to him he shook his head at her with a rueful smile.

"Your imagination beats mine!" he said. "What on earth do you expect to find in Mrs. O'Keefe's room?"

"I don't know. I just know that we have to look."

"If she catches us we'll be for it!"

"Let's hope she doesn't hit us on the head!" She pressed forward. "Hurry! We haven't much time."

He opened the door, pressed the switch of the light. They tip-toed in, guiltily.

Michael stopped short.

At his side, Miranda stopped, staring, a quiver of cold excitement chasing over her. There it was, the evidence she had suspected, the reason for the hostility she had felt spraying like an invisible aura from the woman, O'Keefe.

CHAPTER NINE

MICHAEL SAID: "The deeper I get in this the less I understand."

Miranda forked the last piece of chicken and put it in her mouth. He sat at the head of the big mahogany table. She sat at the side. A bowl of mixed roses filled the air with sweetness. The french windows were wide to the terrace but not a breath of wind fluttered the candles. It was a scene of pure romance. Even the chicken seemed more delicate in texture, more subtle in flavour than any she had tasted.

Resentment pricked her. Why did it have to be spoiled? Why couldn't they be left alone to find their way towards each other in peace without the thrusting impulse of the outside world. Unconsciously, she sighed.

"Be patient," he said quietly.

She looked up at him, her eyes misting. "I wish it wasn't like this."

"Do you think *I* don't? And it's *my* problem. I keep telling myself that it'll be resolved. That, then, there'll be time for you and me."

"Will there?"

"All the time in the world."

She held her breath. "I'm afraid," she whispered. "I – I feel as if its running out. I want to hold on to it. To cry 'stop!' And I can't. It's a horrible feeling. As if we're on a steep slope, falling down, into – nothing."

"At least we're falling together."

"Are we?"

He pushed back his chair and strode to the open window. She sat, motionless, cold, watching him.

He said, without turning: "It would be easy to say I love you."

His words came to her as if from a distance. She was isolated, cut off from him, afraid that she would lose control and run to him, pleading with him to say it. If he didn't mean it,

it didn't matter. She thirsted to hear the words. The years behind were a desert through which she had struggled to the sight of a green oasis. If it proved to be only a mirage, she could live in its hope for a while.

"Perhaps I do. I don't know." He turned and looked at her with troubled eyes. "Perhaps you think you've fallen in love with me."

The words "I have! I love you with all my heart," fluttered around her tongue, moths around the flame that sprang up in the core of the ice that held her frozen. She pressed her lips together and was silent.

"I do know that this is not our moment. I'm too involved. And you're still too uncertain in life. I know it's masculine selfishness – but I must wait. I *must* find Boy. Try and understand."

The ice melted. "Females can be selfish too," she whispered. She opened her bag and taking out a handkerchief dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "It's all right! I'm not crying! I've got a headache. It always makes my eyes water."

His face softened. "I won't call you a liar."

"No!" She gave a tremulous laugh. "Don't!"

The door opened. Mrs. O'Keefe came in with a tray.

"Will you have coffee in here, sir?"

"Yes, thank you."

The gaunt figure executed its mechanical walk. The hands, when they had put the tray on the end of the table, folded in front of her, small white animals against the black dress.

"Will you and the young lady be staying here tonight?"

Miranda smarted beneath the sting of the suggestive tone. Romance fled out of the room as she saw herself through the woman's eyes.

"No," she said, her voice cutting the air.

The woman didn't even glance at her. Poker-faced she kept her body turned towards the man.

"And you, sir?"

"No, Mrs. O'Keefe, I won't be staying."

"Where will you be, sir?"

Miranda stiffened. Nothing was different. The woman

didn't move, neither face nor voice showed a flicker of emotion, but the room was suddenly charged with it.

"At a hotel."

"Which hotel, sir? It's in case that letter you're expecting should arrive."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. O'Keefe. It wasn't important."

"Very good, sir."

The woman turned. Gliding in the long black dress she reached the door.

Miranda called her name in a soft, cooing voice. The woman stopped, turned slowly. Across the room they looked into each other's eyes, assessing each other, probing each other's thoughts.

"Yes, miss?"

Miranda was aware of Michael's quick move forwards but she kept her eyes locked in the bright, black gaze that pierced her own.

"Mr. Sheridan and I are staying at The Old Mill," she said quietly, smooth as dripping cream.

"The Old Miil." Not a ripple touched the gaunt features.

"If you want us you can reach us there."

"Very good, miss."

She glided away, a mechanical doll with a hostile, active mind. The door closed behind her.

Michael strode to her chair and pressed his hands on the arm.

"Why?" The words were thrust at her. "Why did you tell her? You heard what I said. Didn't you realise that I don't want her to know where I am?"

She looked up into his angry face, so close to hers.

"Of course I did."

"Then why?"

"Don't you see – if Mrs. O'Keefe is in touch with your wife, if she is acting the go-between – the letter will come to the hotel."

He leaned closer. "She's no fool. She won't be so obvious."

"She's not all that clever. Michael –" She put a hand on his, feeling the tension. "I'm sure I'm right. You want your wife to reach you. You must let her know where you are."

Slowly the tension went out of him. "Of course you're right," he said, and moved away to light a cigarette. "It was a shock. I always thought Mrs. O'Keefe was on *my* side. That's one of the most unpleasant by-products of a divorce, friends range themselves up on either side. I'd never have kept her on if I'd known what I know now."

"Maybe it was your wife who wanted her to stay."

"Oh God – will it never stop?"

She was silent. There was nothing she could say.

"It's this waiting. It goes on and on. I feel so helpless. If only I could *do* something."

"You can have some coffee," she suggested. "Shall I pour?"

"Yes –" He gave her an attempt at a smile. "Please."

She lifted the silver coffee-pot. Her mind jerked. How many times had "she" touched this smooth handle. The coffee flowed, black and steaming, but Miranda saw the face of her predecessor in the shining jug, as she had seen it, looking out at her from the big silver frame on the table at the side of Mrs. O'Keefe's bed. The inscription flared across the shoulder, beneath the treble rows of pearls. To my friend, sincerely yours, Elizabeth Sheridan.

The face was still a shock, raw along the ends of her nerves. She had formed a mental image of the, until now, nameless presence of Michael's first wife. It had been a cold, calculating image. Now, the reality was disquieting. The young woman in the photograph had dark brown hair whose thick fringe revealed soft blue eyes. The flesh was creamy. The eyes wide and innocent. The mouth softly, lusciously curving. The expression was disturbingly gentle.

She was, suddenly, very tired. The angry excitement that had keyed her to a high pitch throughout the past forty-eight hours was gone. In all the confusion there was only one concrete fact. The boy *had* been snatched from his father's car.

Her mind went blank. What else did she know? Nothing. Michael said that his wife wanted money – but there had been no such demand. Elizabeth wouldn't have known that he would stay at the hotel but, surely, in that case the letter would already be in this house?

This man, this stranger, would find her, Miranda, an easy

subject for any story he liked to tell her. What did she know about him?

Mrs. O'Keefe's words came back to her. The woman had *expected* her to stay. How many others had Michael brought back to his house? She saw him in the tram. Heard his voice. "I wanted to make love to you." His words in this room. "It would be easy to say I love you." How easy? How often had he said it to some other woman? Here. In this room.

She put her half-empty cup down on the table.

"I want to go," she said, avoiding his eyes.

"You haven't finished your coffee."

"I don't want any more."

She picked up her bag and went to the door. His voice reached for her.

"What's the matter, Miranda."

"Nothing."

"Then why are you angry with me?"

"I told you. I've got a headache.

"Is it bad?"

He was at her side. She slipped away from his touch.

"Bad enough."

His hand was on the door when the telephone began to ring. He shot her a glance and pulled at the door. Mrs. O'Keefe was already in the hall. Had she been waiting there? Expecting the call?

She lifted the receiver as Michael said: "I'll take it."

Mrs. O'Keefe faced him, blandly, speaking into the phone. "I'm afraid you have the wrong number."

Michael was across the hall. He snatched the receiver from her hand as she lowered it.

"Hallo – who is that?" A pause. "They've hung up."

"I told you." Mrs. O'Keefe's voice was smooth. "Wrong number."

"And I tell you," he said coldly, replacing the receiver on its cradle, "that I don't believe you."

An ugly flush spread across the woman's face. "Are you calling me a liar, Mr. Sheridan?"

"If the cap fits, wear it."

The blood drained away, leaving the skin parchment white.

"If you're not satisfied with –"

He broke in. "Should I be satisfied, Mrs. O'Keefe? Are you *my* friend?"

Something flashed in the back of her eyes. In an instant it was gone.

"If you doubt my loyalty I can leave." She was the picture of outraged pride.

"Oh, I don't doubt your loyalty, Mrs. O'Keefe." He spoke with smooth insinuation. "When I want you to go I'll say so."

"And if I give you notice?"

He leaned towards her. "Do you?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you, Mrs. O'Keefe?"

Her lips cracked into a parody of a smile. "You know I wouldn't leave you and the young master," she said.

Michael straightened. "I thought not." He turned and moved towards the door. "Let's go, Miranda."

Mrs. O'Keefe followed them. "And don't worry, Mr. Sheridan. I'll be in touch the moment the letter arrives."

Michael went out of the door without looking back.

"I'm sure you will."

The garden fell away to the sea in a moon-drenched fairyland. Miranda walked round the car. The doors slammed. She saw none of the beauty. She saw only the gaunt, straight-backed figure, outlined against the lighted hall. The face was in shadow but she shivered beneath the knowledge of the look in the black eyes. As the car turned towards the avenue of trees she glanced back. The woman was still there, motionless, watching them.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LETTER didn't come. Not by the morning post. Nor by the afternoon post.

Michael refused to leave the hotel all day, but after lunch, unable to endure the sight of his drawn face, still lost in the confused reaction of the previous night, Miranda went out.

The night had brought a change in the weather. Grey clouds covered the sky in a thick blanket. The air was heavy, charged with a storm that didn't break.

Miranda drove down to the small harbour. She sat in the car, staring out at the river's mouth with vacant eyes. There must be *something* she could do to clarify the situation. Her mind was an aching vacuum. It was as if she and Michael were goldfish circling endlessly in a glass bowl. Faces loomed up, peered in at them. Rupert, Derek, Polly – and now Mrs. O'Keefe. No one made contact. She seemed to hear their laughter. It echoed, hollowly, beyond the transparent globe in which she circled.

"Hallo, Mrs. Miller."

She started. Turned her head. Dobson's face peered in at her window.

"Did I make you jump?"

"I didn't hear you."

She searched his face. Was he in the conspiracy? It didn't seem possible. How could she know? The whole world had turned into suspicion.

"Is anything wrong?"

She leaned towards him. "Have you heard from the Bishops?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side. "You want them pretty badly, don't you?"

"Yes."

His eyes narrowed into concern. "What have they done to you, Mrs. Miller?"

She heard the note of angry protection in his voice, but it didn't touch her.

"I can't tell you, Dobson."

"Is there anything I can do? You know I will if I can."

"There's nothing anyone can do," she sighed.

"When they do come back I'll give them a piece of my mind! Using my boat to cause you more trouble. You've had enough. More than enough. I tell you they'll get a hot reception from me!"

An idea came to her. "Maybe there is something."

"You name it and it's done."

"Can you find out where they've gone?"

"I can try." His smile was huge. "I've friends along the coast. If the *Regina Rose* is anywhere near I'll find her for you."

"Bless you, Dobson! You're an angel!"

His laugh rang out. "That's something I've never been called!" he chortled. "Now, don't you fret yourself, Mrs. Miller. There's plenty of people around here who're ready to give you a helping hand."

"Thank you, Dobson. I'm staying at The Old Mill."

"You go back there and wait for my news."

She pressed the starter. Dobson stood away from the car. She drove fast, back to Michael. She *had* done something. She had looked over the top of the glass bowl and drawn a deep breath of air.

At the hotel she sprang out of the car and ran into the hall. The bar was beginning to fill up with the evening company. She found him at a corner table, a glass of whisky to his lips.

She hurried across and sat at his side.

"Michael!"

"Where have you been all this time?"

His voice was rough. The ends of the words blurred.

"How long have you been drinking?"

He grinned at her sheepishly, defiantly. "Long enough to take the edge off."

"Well, here's something else to help you. Dobson's going to find them." He was silent. "Aren't you pleased?"

"If he does," he said hopelessly, "what then?"

She wanted to shake him. Her fists clenched.

"What then?" she cried. "You can go and get Boy back!"

"Just like that!"

"Why not?"

He lifted the glass and drained it. "Waiter!" His call was loud. "Same again."

The waiter nodded his head.

"Two," Michael called in his over-loud voice. "Doubles." And to Miranda: "Let's get good and drunk."

"I don't want to."

"Well, I do."

She looked down at the table. It had meant so much to her,

Dobson's offer of help. Michael's reception of her news thrust her back into the frustrated helplessness. She made a move. His hand caught hers.

"Don't go."

"I want to wash."

"Don't leave me."

"I'll only be a minute."

"Promise." His hand held her, drawing her over the table towards him. "You're not still mad at me?"

"I never was." She withdrew her hand and sat back in her chair.

"But it was more than a headache," he persisted.

"I was tired."

"And Mrs. O'Keefe made you doubt what you felt about me?"

She didn't look at him. "Not what I *felt*."

"Then – what was it all about?"

"Nothing."

"For pete's sake," he exploded, "don't treat me as if I'm a moron as well as a pariah!"

She raised her eyes and looked him straight in the face.

"Have you taken other women home?" she asked.

"So that's it!"

"Have you?"

The waiter appeared at their table. She waited impatiently while the drinks were put before them. The silver coins put on the tray. When they were alone Michael said, his voice quiet and low: "I'm no monk. I've been divorced for eighteen months. But my home is where my son lives. You are the first woman I've taken there since Elizabeth walked out just on two years ago."

Relief flooded her. There was no doubting the sincerity of his voice.

"Thank you."

"It's *I* who should thank you." A smile touched his lips. "In spite of what you imagined you still went out and enlisted Dobson's help on my behalf."

She leaned over the table. "But you don't think it'll help."

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking. All day. I've got a feeling there's more to this than it appears to be."

"But what more could there be?"

He looked at her in silence. His eyes were dark with pain. His shoulders lifted in a shrug that tore at her heartstrings.

"I just don't know," he said. "It's this long wait. It's not like Elizabeth. She's impetuous. If it *was* Elizabeth on the phone to Mrs. O'Keefe I'd've heard by now."

"You think it's Bishop who's behind it."

"Those young men –"

"Rupert and Derek?"

He nodded. "Elizabeth wouldn't know men like that." He paused, his brows creasing. "Besides, to give her her due, I believe she's fond of Boy. In her own way. She'd never risk an accident for him."

"But if it *is* Bishop – what else does he want?"

His hand moved in a helpless gesture. "I don't know. I know very little about him." He lifted his glass. "But I do know that if I don't hear something soon, I'll go to the police and to hell with the publicity!"

She lifted her glass. Over its rim she saw the waiter come back to their table.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Sheridan."

Her eyes met Michael's. "I'll show you where it is."

She pushed back her chair and walked in front of him. Her legs were stiff but the blood raced through her body. Her heart hammered as he drew her in beside him in to the small space of the telephone booth.

"Mr. Sheridan?"

It was a man's voice, remote but clear.

"Yes. Who's that?"

"There's a public telephone box a hundred yards down the street. Go to it."

"But –"

The phone clicked.

"I heard," Miranda said. "Come on."

It was already darkening to an early twilight. The cloud bank pressed down on the narrow street. The air was thick,

Across the sea a distant flash of lightning. Thunder – a menacing drum-roll.

The lighted booth was empty. Again they pressed into the small space, side by side. Waited. When the bell rang it made her jump.

Michael grabbed the receiver and reached for her, drawing her close so that her ear was against it. The sound of a button being pressed. The fall of coins. The man's voice.

"Is your head hurting?"

"My head?" Michael echoed blankly. Asking quickly: "So it was you behind it!"

"A friendly warning."

"Friendly!"

"I assure you it was."

"I don't want your friendship, Bishop."

"Did I say my name was Bishop?"

"I don't give a damn what your name is," Michael exploded. "What is this all about? And don't tell me its a friendly call."

Silence. The sound of breathing, muffled, eerie, in the earpiece.

"Get on with you blackmail!" Michael cried.

Miranda pressed his hand. His fingers tightened. She bit her lip against the pain of the flesh, crushed between the bones.

"Blackmail!" The muted voice was smoothly arrogant. "A mother has a right to her child."

"Is Elizabeth there? Let me talk to her."

The wires crackled at the sudden sound of laughter. Michael's head jerked away from the noise.

"Not so fast, Mr. Sheridan! Not so fast!"

Michael said slowly, heavily, his breath rasping in his throat.

"I'm warning you, Bishop. I don't know what you want but I give you my word, if you harm my son –"

"Why would I harm him?"

Michael went on, ignoring the interruption. "I'll put the police on to you."

"Now that's foolish. There's no need for the police."

"Isn't there? I begin to think there is."

"Don't forget – you have to find us. It'd take time. I've got your son."

"Elizabeth wouldn't hurt him."

"She might not be in a position to do anything about it."

"By God, if I could get my hands on you –"

"I wouldn't try anything foolish, Sheridan."

Miranda felt the strength go out of the hand within her own. She glanced up at his face and looked away.

In a moment he spoke, his voice sharp and cold as ice-splinters.

"How much do you want?"

"That's better."

"How much?"

A pause. Miranda saw a family, man and wife and two small children, walking across the street. They were laughing. The boy carried a boat, the girl a doll. They were figures in a dream. Reality was here. Impossible reality. Tightening around them in the small booth.

"Five thousand."

"Five thousand?"

"I'm not a greedy man."

Michael swallowed. "It'll take time."

"Of course!"

"And when I've got it?"

"I'll be in touch. Small notes, Mr. Sheridan."

"Do you think I'll bother with you after I get my son back?"

"I don't know. I intend to be sure you can't try. One other thing. Don't trace this call."

The phone clicked. The dialling one began. Michael held the receiver in front of him, staring at it.

Miranda pressed his hand. It lay in hers, unresponsive.

"Don't worry, darling." The endearment passed unnoticed. "It'll be all right."

"Will it?"

"You can get the money?"

"Oh – yes."

The receiver slipped from his nerveless hand. It fell with a clatter that made her jump, tearing at her own nerves.

"Then it'll all be over in a day or two."

His eyes came down to hers. "If I could believe that!"

"Of course you can. What can go wrong?"

She reached for the receiver and put it back.

"He only asked for five thousand."

"Surely that's not something to worry about!"

He shook his head. "It doesn't ring true."

"You think it's only a beginning?"

"I don't know." He rubbed a hand, wearily, across his eyes. "I just don't know."

There was a knock on the glass door. A man waited, his face impatient, the coins rattling in his hand. As they stepped out of the booth, he pushed past, muttering to himself.

Lights came on along the street. People passed. Families, united in their holiday. A couple, the boy's arm around the girl's shoulders, their faces radiant. A dog pulled back against a lamp-post and was dragged on by its lead.

She and Michael walked in silence, circling in the invisible glass bowl that isolated them from normality.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOMEHOW, the night passed. The storm rumbled along its edges but didn't break. The dawn brought no relief from the pressure of the air.

When she met him at breakfast she saw that, for him, too, it had been a long night without sleep. Sipping the scalding tea, she realised, with a shock, that this could be their last breakfast. By tomorrow he would have his son. She would be on her own. Fear brushed her with cold wings. Michael Sheridan was her only contact with the world. Without him she would be adrift again. Life would be without meaning.

He drank his tea with an abstracted air. Although she could reach out and touch him, although his big body filled the chair, he was without substance. He looked across the room, staring out of the window with vacant eyes. She wanted urgently, desperately, to make him aware of herself.

"What's he like?" she asked.

"Who?" His voice was hollow.

"Your son."

"He's just a boy."

She leaned forwards. "Michael," she cried, calling to him from her loneliness.

His eyes came round to hers. She shivered at their emptiness. It was as if he didn't recognise her.

"Please talk to me. I need to be talked to."

Life came back into his face. "Forgive me!" A shadowy smile touched his lips. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Everything about you! Give me solid ground to walk on! Did you christen him 'Boy'?"

"No!" The smile strengthened, reaching his eyes. "Foolishly, we called him Michael. We had to find something else. And, even as a baby, he was definitely all boy!"

"He looks a sensitive child."

"His looks belie him! Believe me, he's tough."

"But you said he's afraid."

"Of the dark! He is! There's what he calls 'monkey' in the dark."

She gave a short laugh. "He's right about that! There *is* something in the dark!"

"Don't get me wrong. He outfaces 'monkey'! Apart from that he's devoid of fear. Too lacking! It frightens *me*. He'll climb to the top of any tree. He swims like a fish and drives me demented in the sea. I'm a poor swimmer! He just laughs at me." His eyes caught hers. "As you are now!"

She grinned at him. "The proud father! Is he top of his class? In the football team?"

His own grin was sheepish. "As a matter of fact – he is!"

"And never kept in after school?"

His laugh rang out. "Indeed he is! And he's no respecter of person's! He'll cheek you as soon as look at you! I told you – he's a boy!"

She said quietly: "His mother must miss him."

"She has him for two weeks of every holiday."

"It's not the same." She finished her tea and poured another cup. "What happened?"

"Between me and Elizabeth?"

She nodded.

"Nothing dramatic. We married very young. When the rosy

hue faded we found that there was little left. Then I struck lucky. I think, without money, if we'd had to, we might have found a modus vivendi. As it was, after a quarrel, I came home one night to find her gone."

"To Bishop?"

"Just away from *me*! That came later."

"And she didn't take the child."

"She would have, if it had been a girl. She said a boy needed a father."

She watched him light a cigarette. The smoke was a grey streamer from his nostrils. The image of the child was clearly defined. But the woman?

"You said she loves money," she said slowly. "Is Bishop rich?"

"He's a bank clerk."

"But she married him."

He shrugged. "I guess he has other charms!" He spoke easily, without bitterness. "Elizabeth is an emotional woman. She's never grown up. She loves money and all that it brings but she's romantic enough to believe she can have 'love' as well."

"And you're not?" Miranda asked quietly.

He gave her a quick look. "I don't know. I think it's more difficult to weather the bad patches if you can afford to separate."

"Funny, really, it should be easier."

"Life's a funny thing!" He pushed back his chair. "But we haven't time to philosophise this morning. Shall we go?"

For a few brief moments time had stood still. They had drawn close. Had talked together as if the past must merge into the future. It was over. They were back in the no-man's-land where everything was uncertain, without substance, the ground a treacherous bog through which she tried to find a safe path. . . .

She drove along the sea-road. She looked at the tram in the wide fields and remembered that she had still to wash the cups. She wanted to stop. To go in and tidy. It became, suddenly, a symbol.

She couldn't stop. The car swept past. The long, straight

road had acquired the haunted sensation of a repeated nightmare. She drove back and forth in a series of fruitless journeys. A terrible desolation flooded over her. The death-wish welled up again. In a violent reaction she felt a wave of hatred for the man at her side. He had saved her life but the gift was sour unless he stayed at the core of it.

She left him at his bank in the centre of the town.

"No," she said, in answer to his query. "I won't come in. I'll pick you up in a couple of hours."

She drove quickly away from him, hardening herself against his look. She needed to be away from him. She had to try and find her own contact with life.

She went to her hairdresser. The man greeted her with an easy pleasure. It was a very small point of contact, but it gave her a feeling of identity. She was, momentarily, Mrs. Miller. Not a shadow whose existence depended on the sight of herself in Michael Sheridan's eyes.

Her scalp tingled beneath the washing. Felt clean and invigorated. She listened to the man's chatter as his fingers moved about her head. The heat and steady pulsating of the dryer dulled her thoughts. She was pleased with the effect when her hair was brushed.

She came out into the street with renewed courage.

He was waiting for her. Her heart leaped at the sight of him. How many more times would he wait for her? She knew that she had had her "hair-do", not for herself, but for him. Everything she did was done for him. The confusing love-hate welled up in her. She stiffened as he moved across the pavement. He opened the door as she drew in to the kerb and threw a canvas bag into the back.

His smile was like balm. "Very nice!" he said.

"I'm glad you approve."

She let in the clutch. The car eased into the traffic. He began to speak. Stopped. Took out his cigarette-case.

"You got the money?" It was a foolish question but she had to talk.

"Old Merryweather thought I'd taken leave of my senses! Curiosity oozed out of him but he's the epitome of a bank manager. All he said was: 'Of course, Mr. Sheridan. We're at

your service. You want us to sell the I.C.I. shares? It's not a good time to sell but if that's what you want us to do, we'll do it'."

Somehow, the afternoon passed. They sat in the garden, in the sultry air beneath the blanket of cloud, waiting. For Miranda, the hours were hurrying her towards a blank wall. For Michael the hour-long minutes dragged too slowly towards an opening in the same blank wall.

They had tea in the garden, on the stroke of four, as if, by taking even so small an action, they could start things moving.

It worked. At ten minutes past the hour, the waitress came across the lawn with the expected message.

Michael sprang to his feet. He was already several paces away when he realised that she wasn't at his side.

"Come on, Miranda." He flung the words at her where she still sat in the low deck-chair.

She couldn't move. She was weighed down by the breathless air, by the fear that movement would sweep her on towards the blank wall.

"I – I don't think I will," she said.

He strode back. "For pity's sake, don't leave me now."

In spite of the heat, she shivered.

"I thought – now – you'd not need me."

He held out his hand to her. "Now, more than at any time. Come."

He drew her to her feet and, immediately, dropped her hand. With an effort she forced her legs to keep pace with his. They were back in the telephone booth, their bodies touching in the small space. She tried to edge away but there was no room.

The disembodied voice was in her ear again. The unreal, terribly real, conversation went on.

"You've got it?"

"Yes."

"Right. Now this is what you do. Just this. Nothing else or it'll be the worse for your son. Put it in a suitcase and take it to Hastings station. Leave the suitcase in the left luggage. Take the ticket to a newsagent, name of Surrey, 17 West Road. It's

the third turning along from the main entrance. Put it in an envelope and leave it with the owner of the shop. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Now."

"Yes."

"And Sheridan –"

"Yes?"

"No tricks! No police."

"No."

"If there's any sign –"

Michael snapped: "I said no police. And Boy?"

"There's a café on the front, The Seagull."

"Oh, no! That's not good enough, Bishop!"

"It'll have to be."

"If you think I'll hand over the money before I. . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence as the line went dead. Feverishly, foolishly, he rattled the bar on the rest, banged the receiver down and, without looking at her, left the box and strode across the hall.

She drove along the sea-road. He was silent at her side. Once, she glanced at him. His jaw was set, his lips pressed into a tight line. She looked back at the road as the car swept down a short hill. Braked to take a sharp right-angled bend where the field fell away in a steep bank beyond the hedge.

"Michael," she said, thinking aloud, "do you think Bishop means to return your son?"

"I'm damned if I know!" His voice was weary. "I've no choice."

"Maybe you have."

"What for instance?"

"Have you ever met him?"

"No. But he'd recognise *me*. My face is too well known."

"Mine isn't."

He gave her a sharp look. "You mean *you* could follow him."

"Why not?"

"It's too risky."

"For Boy?"

"For you, too."

"Why?"

"Bishop's not the man to be tricked."

"He wouldn't know."

"And if he did? If he realised you were after him?"

Cold water fell down her back. "What could he do to me?"

"I'm not prepared to risk it."

She pressed her foot hard on the accelerator and raced up a steep hill. "You can't really stop me," she said quietly. "And I doubt if the risk'd be much. You can drop me where I can get a bus. You take the car to the station and go to the newsagents. I'll go alone. There's nothing to connect us. I can follow him. Find out where he's got the *Regina Rose*. It won't be in Hastings so leave the car in the station and I'll take it on. You can go to The Seagull. If Boy comes, everything'll be all right. If he doesn't, if Bishop plays false, I'll telephone you and we can go on together to where he is."

He was silent. He sat, rigid, smoking from a cigarette that drooped from his mouth. She waited, aware of the battle of his thoughts. He had still not spoken when the car drew into the outskirts of the town.

She slowed. Stopped. Twisted in her seat to look at him.

"It's the child who really matters," she said quietly. "Not you or me. Let me do this. I *need* to do something."

He turned his head. "Miranda . . ." His voice was taut, but his eyes shone. "I never knew anyone like you!"

"That," she said on a light laugh, "is my favourite cliché!"

He put out a hand and touched her cheek. "Mine too!"

In a quick movement she caught his hand in hers and pressed a kiss into the palm.

"Miranda –"

He pulled his hand away and drew her close. The wheel bit into her ribs but she was oblivious of the pain. She rested, a moment, against his shoulder. Then, pushing him from her, she got out of the car. He slid into the driver's seat.

"In an hour," she said, "it'll all be over."

"Be careful!"

"I will!"

"If there's the smallest thing that threatens you – get out."

She gave a short laugh. Her lips were dry. She licked at them nervously. "I can take care of myself!"

Could she? Her stomach tightened on a knot of fear.

His hand caught hers where it lay on the door. "If Bishop does intend to play another trick – get out. Promise me! Otherwise I won't leave you. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you."

Her smile was stiff. "Nothing can," she assured him. "It'll all take place in public."

"I don't like it."

A sound caught her attention. "There's my bus! See you at The Seagull."

She felt his eyes on her as she ran the few paces to the bus stop. As she mounted the step the car moved away. She sat down by the door and fear was an iron band squeezing the blood from her heart.

It had seemed so simple, so safe, sitting at his side. Now, on her own, she was panic-stricken. She wanted to ring the bell. Stop the bus. Stop thought.

"Where to, miss?"

The mist cleared from her eyes as she saw the conductor's uniformed figure. The blood flowed in her veins again. Her voice was steady as she said: "The station, please."

CHAPTER TWELVE

HER CAR WAS parked in the yard. She glanced inside and saw the ignition key in the lock. She reached in and drew it out. It was cold in her hand as she turned away.

The roads were full of holiday-makers. She threaded her way through the crowds, searching their faces. What would he look like? Was he short or tall? Thin or fat? Would he carry the threat of danger like an invisible aura?

She squared her shoulders as she reached the turning. Of course, there would be nothing to distinguish him. He might be anvone. Any man who walked alone. This one, for instance who strode so purposefully towards her. She stiffened as he

came level. His eyes met hers. She recognised the quickened gleam of interest and realised that she was staring at him. Colour flooded her cheeks as she lowered her eyelids and hurried on.

The side-turning was comparatively empty. Forcing herself not to look back, she walked quickly along, counting the numbers.

The newsagent was on a corner. She stopped and looked in the window. She could see into the shop. It was empty except for two small boys, buying comics.

A voice at her shoulder brought her round with a start.

"You look lonely!"

It was the man. She saw in vivid detail each feature in his face, a septic spot on the point of his chin. She burned beneath the leering smile.

"I'm waiting for my husband," she said in frozen distaste.

"Sorry! No offence!"

He was unabashed as he turned and sauntered off. A tremor ran through her as she stared after him. What was she doing here? How had she become involved in this game of cops-and-robbers?

A man turned the corner. A young man with a mop of auburn hair, burnished as copper. Tall, slender, he came with virile purpose. He was too far for her to get more than an impression of his features but the action of his body was imprinted deep in her mind. There was a sleekness, a grace. His feet were light on the pavement. His arms swung in easy rhythm. His head was poised. His eyes looked straight ahead. He was like an animal. A cat whose muscles rippled, smooth as silk. A proud, young, masculine animal who swung along the street as if it belonged to him.

Her heart missed a beat. How long had she stood, watching him? Had he noticed her? She twisted on her heel, and went into the shop. The bell tinkled as she opened the door. A squat, fat woman looked up at her from behind the newspaper counter.

"I want a birthday card."

"Over there." The woman pointed and turned back to the boys. "Well, Jimmy, have you made up your mind yet?"

Miranda moved to the display of cards. The skin on her back was stretched in quivering anticipation. Her fingers idled among the cards but her ears waited for the bell. Although she anticipated it, when the soft tinkle came it was like the blast of a trumpet. Without looking at it, she selected a card. It took all the force of her will not to turn round, not to see his face as he passed behind her, so close she felt the faint movement of air between their bodies.

The woman's voice broke off its chatter to the boys. "Good morning, Mr. Bishop."

"You have a letter for me."

The man's voice was familiar. Deeper. Rounded. But it was still the disembodied voice of the telephone.

"I have it right here."

"Thank you."

Miranda moved round the far side of the board with its display of cards. She felt naked. Tremulously alive. As if the power of her concentrated thought must betray her to the man. The top of her head was agonisingly exposed above the edge of the board. She bent low, fingering a notebook. She knew that for ever, when she saw a small, crimson loose-leaf book she would relive this moment of vivid, double-edged impotence. Her legs stiffened against the urge to rush out and confront him. Her teeth clenched, biting on the words she longed to shout.

The woman asked: "Did you find what you wanted?"

Miranda looked up. To her surprise she was beside the counter.

"Yes, thanks."

"I'll find an envelope for you."

"No. How much?"

"Can I see it?"

Miranda looked at the back of the card in her hand. Why hadn't she gone immediately? Why was she wasting time with this ridiculous card?

"It's one-and-six."

She ferreted in her purse. Gave the woman a two-shilling piece Was already at the door when the woman called: "Here's your change."

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"Keep it."

The bell tinkled. She was outside. The short street was empty. She ran, swearing at herself, her heels clicking on the pavement.

The crowd in the main road had thinned but as she raced into the entrance to the station a train had already disgorged its contents. She was caught in a flowing tide of bodies. Feverishly, she pushed her way through, oblivious of the angry comments she evoked.

She came out on the far side. He was there, his red hair dulled by the lesser light of the station roof, beside the left luggage office. He leaned on one hand, his back to her, every line of his body relaxed.

The porter came to the counter. The suitcase was hidden from her as Bishop straightened. He slid his hand in his trouser pocket. Dropped the coins on the counter with an arrogant disregard for the fact that one rolled over the edge. Took the suitcase as the porter bent to retrieve the coin. Turned.

For a moment, across the open space, their eyes locked, Miranda jerked back to life. She walked towards the bookstall. He stood still, watching her. Her heart raced. Had he recognised her? Not from the newsagent's shop. Her back had been towards him and there was nothing memorable about her straw-coloured dress. But from the moment in the street when she had stood, staring at him? She swore softly to herself, as she flicked the pages of a woman's magazine. A feeling of danger trickled down her spine. Her scalp tingled. Was he moving, silent on his light feet, coming close behind her with his sinuous, cat-like action?

Her nerve broke. She swung round.

He had gone.

Her eyes swept round the station. He was nowhere in sight. She ran to the entrance and jerked sideways. A few feet in front of her, across the pavement, he was getting into a taxi. The door slammed. His face was framed in the window.

She shrank into the shadows. The cab moved off. She had seen him for no more than a single instant but every detail of his features was brilliantly clear in her mind. The pale skin, scattered with freckles along the cheekbones. The langurous

eyes. The broad forehead. The full lips, parted in a faint smile as if his thoughts amused him.

She leaned against the wall, trembling. Was he laughing at *her*? Should she give up this chase in which she performed her role of amateur detective with such conspicuous lack of success?

Even as she asked the silent question she moved out from the sheltering shadows. She had to go on. It had been *her* idea. She had to prove herself right. She couldn't go crawling back to Michael with her tail between her legs!

A glance had told her that Bishop wasn't watching out of the back window. Her pace quickened. Probably, she encouraged herself, she had mis-read the meaning of his smile. It was the smile of triumph. The complacent smile of a cat with the mouse between its paws.

She reached her car. As the engine sprang to life she saw the back of the cab, disappearing along the road. She followed, swinging out of the entrance in front of a car whose brakes jammed on. She flung an apologetic smile at the angry face of the driver and looked ahead.

For a moment she thought she had lost the taxi-cab. Then as she accelerated past a van she saw it again. And the face of Bishop, white and clear, turned towards her as it swung round a corner.

Anger whipped into a taut spring. "All right!" she cried aloud. "If you *do* know I'm following you. I'm glad. It's time you learned that you can't have it all your way!"

The cab led her along the sea-front. As if it were written in letters of flame she saw the words "The Seagull". For an instant she was tempted to stop. To call Michael to her side. But the cab was already getting away.

She allowed another car to come between them and clung to its tail. Suddenly, the cab swung away to the left. She slowed. Why was Bishop going into the funicular that climbed the side of the steep hill? Was he trying to shake her off? Was he really going up? Or was he only pretending?

She saw the cab stop and came to a quick decision.

Her eyes straight ahead, not turning to see if he watched her, she swept past. Once out of sight, she braked. Waited.

Through the back window she saw the cab come out. It was empty. A surge of triumph filled her. This trick was hers!

Turning in a sharp curve she raced back. The funicular was already mounting the hill. She pressed down on the accelerator. It would be touch-and-go if she could reach the top in time.

She swept along the road, up the hill. When she reached the top she slowed. A car was already drawing away but she saw the gleam of his hair through the rear window.

She accelerated after him. Past the open grassland where children played on swings and see-saws. Up a steep slope. A big, white house loomed over her. Above a brick wall its raised garden was bright with flowers. A single, wide window caught the sun. She blinked. In the centre of brightness she saw a small face. Blond hair. So like the picture Michael had shown her she momentarily slowed.

Her foot pressed down again. Bishop was getting away. It was the foolish fancy of overstrung nerves. There were other boys with pointed chins and pale, soft hair.

The miles ticked up on the speedometer. Five. Ten. She began to be afraid. The exhilaration of the chase through the town, the thrill of her own act of pursuit, faded. Even anger was gone.

If he had suspected her in the town, now, in open country, he must be certain. She was alone with him. Her wrists ached as she gripped the wheel. Her foot was flat on the floor. The speedometer needle flickered at the eighty mark. She clung to the shreds of her dwindling courage. She *was* alone. But, so long as she remained in her car, there was nothing he could do to her.

As if in answer to her thought the car in front showed red brake lights. Fire spat along her nerves as it swung off the main road. She had only a few seconds in which to make up her mind. If she, too, turned, he would, finally, be sure that she was following him. If she didn't it would all have been for nothing.

Her mind cold and clear, she thrust at her own brakes. Took the corner in a tyre-screeching curve. The road was narrow, twisting. His car was out of sight. She sat bolt upright, wrists tensed, cutting the corners. Suddenly, she saw him turning up

a drive. A board stood at the entrance. Burlington Hall Hotel. She braked, skidding to a standstill and stared at it. Was this another trick to elude her? Or was the child here? It was a hotel. Not a private house. Nothing could happen to her in a public place.

She edged in between the gates. The building rose before her, long and low with a gabled roof. His car was parked with several more in a wide curve. She turned and left her own car facing the drive, ready for a get-away. Her heart thumping, uncertain if she was being brave or foolhardy, she crossed the gravel and went in through the open door.

The hall was empty. A young woman looked up from behind the reception desk and smiled at her. Miranda walked quickly towards her.

"Is Mr. Bishop in?"

"Mr. Bishop?"

"A man with red hair."

"I don't think –"

"With a wife and child. A boy of seven, fair."

The girl shook her head. "We have no one –"

Miranda broke in. "He came in. Just now."

"Maybe he's in the lounge. I've only just come on."

"Thank you."

The air seemed electric as she walked across the hall. He must be here! Must be! She couldn't lose him now. The lounge was noisy with talk. With a shock she realised that it must be time for the evening meal. As she reached the door she heard the sound of an engine starting up.

Fool! Idiot! Of course, that was it! It *was* a trick! He had led her in here but he had had no intention of staying. He had waited until she was in the hotel and then he had gone back to his car.

She swung round and raced across the hall. Already the sound of his engine was fading. She *must* see which way he turned at the road.

As she ran out of the front door someone stepped into her path. The impact of their bodies was violent. She staggered, the breath knocked out of her.

An arm went round her shoulders. A hand was against the

back of her head, pressing her face against a leather jacket. She drew in a quick breath. The smell of leather mingled with the sharper smell of the man. She jerked her head and cried aloud as his fingers twisted in her hair.

"Steady, baby! What's the rush?"

"Let me go!" Her voice was muffled, lost. "Let me go!"

"Not so fast!"

The fingers pulled at her hair so that her head fell backwards. His eyes glittered. His mouth was pressed, roughly, against her own. She twisted her head and bit on the pain from her tight-twisting hair. One fist beat helplessly, furiously, at his hard thigh.

"You lout!" she cried. "You – you –" She choked with anger and humiliation.

"What's the matter, baby?" His laugh was coarse. "Think you're too good for me?"

His breath was hot on her cheek. His face was close, out of focus, as his lips sought hers. She lifted her foot and brought the heel, stabbing, down on his toe. His strangled shout was pure joy.

The arms released her in the same moment that another voice asked: "Is this man annoying you, miss?"

"Yes! Yes, he is!"

She sprang away and looked up, relief flooding her. Instantly, it died. In front of her, at Rupert's side, she saw Derek, grinning.

It was Rupert's look that held her. The blood flooded his face in an ugly flush. Obscenities poured from him. There was pain in his twisted features. And something else. Something that chilled her blood.

"Get out of my way," she said, cold as ice.

"Won't do you no good!" Derek grinned.

"If you don't let me pass I'll –"

"You'll what?" The teeth shone between wide-stretched lips.

Her legs turned to water. The only sound was a burst of laughter from the lounge behind her. She didn't need to look to know that bishop's car had gone. She didn't need the voice that echoed in her head to tell her she had failed. And worse.

She had done what Michael had feared. Tried to trick Bishop and, now, he knew. What would he do to the child now? She felt sick.

Rupert snarled: "You've broken my foot."

"I hope I have."

"You'll pay for this."

She gave him a frozen look. "I don't know why you're involved in this filthy business but, make no mistake, it's *you* who'll pay in the end."

Derek said, uneasily beneath the bravado: "We ain't done nothing. Just having fun."

"Fun!" She spat her impotent fury at him. "Do you call it fun to kidnap a small boy?"

The young man shifted from one foot to another. "Who said anything about kidnapping?"

"What do you call it?"

"His ma wanted him for a while. What's wrong with that?"

Her mind quickened. She took a step towards him. "Derek," she began.

Rupert cut her short. "Let's get out of here."

He turned and limped along the front of the hotel. She moved closer as Derek began to go after him.

"I must talk to you," she cried. "Where can I see you – alone?"

He hesitated. Suddenly, he seemed only a boy, uncertain of himself, caught up in events he didn't understand.

"Please," she urged. "For your sake as well as mine."

Rupert's voice cut the frail strand of communication.

"Come on, Derek! Get moving, man!"

He was gone from her, slouching after his companion.

For a moment she stared after him. Then as he turned the corner she walked across the gravel. In the car, she slumped, her head in her hands. From what seemed a far distance, beyond the aching misery of her thoughts, she heard the roar of their motor-bicycles. They swept round the corner of the hotel and thundered past her along the drive.

She lifted her head. There was nothing she could do but go

back to The Seagull and tell Michael. Blindly, her fingers reached for the ignition key. And found nothing.

She stared at the empty hole of the lock. Tears welled up, blurring her vision. It was the final humiliation. She hadn't even had sense enough to remove the key. The tears fell down her cheeks, unheeded.

"Excuse me –"

A face swam into focus as she blinked. The round face of a small girl with two fat, black pigtails over her shoulders.

"Yes?"

"I saw him."

"You saw him?"

The head nodded vigorously. "I was over there, under the tree, walking my dog. I saw the fair one take your key."

"You did?" There was no hope in her.

"Yes. He stood there." She pointed to a bed, bright with pansies and salvias. "He threw your key into the flowers."

Hope was as bright as the gleaming flowers. "You're sure?" She was already out of the car, hurrying across the gravel.

"Quite sure. It was such a funny thing to do."

"Funny!" Miranda's laugh was faintly hysterical. "Show me where he stood."

"Just here."

She went down on her knees. Her fingers pushed at the clustered, multi-coloured faces of the pansies. It was such a small thing to find. The child was young. She could be mistaken about where Derek had stood.

"It went farther on the bed."

Miranda gave her a quick look. She stood watching, very certain and precise. On the end of a green lead a terrier puppy leaped and played, biting it, tossing it with furious growls.

Miranda leaned a hand on the earth. It was warm and dry. with the other hand she felt beneath the flames of the salvias, all of her concentrated in the sensitive probing of her finger tips.

"Ah!" There was something cold on the warm earth. She grabbed it and stood up. "Thank you! Thank you!"

The little girl looked up with her grave expression. "It's nothing. You've laddered your stocking."

"It doesn't matter. Come with me."

She hurried back to the car. Gave the little girl a pound note. Smiled at her protestations and pressed the accelerator.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MICHAEL WAS OUTSIDE The Seagull. He ran and got in beside her. He was alone. Her heart sank. Boy hadn't come back.

"Thank God you're safe!" He almost was angry in his relief. "Where on earth have you been? I saw you go past an hour ago."

She told him, looking out over the leaden sea. Great, black storm clouds piled up across the sky. An eerie, purple light filled the air. The atmosphere was taut with the approaching storm.

She came to the end of her story. He didn't speak. His silence was a void between them. She couldn't look at him. Could only grip the steering-wheel and wait for his reproaches.

He said quietly: "Don't blame yourself."

"But I do! I do! It's all my fault. You didn't want me to do it."

"No, I didn't. You see, I expected something like this."

She turned towards him. His face was grim but his eyes were gentle.

"I don't understand."

"I think I'm beginning to."

"You think Bishop expected to be followed?"

"Certainly he made plans in case he was. It's almost as if he *wanted* it."

"But why?"

Michael was silent. He stared at her but his eyes didn't focus.

"The stakes are too big," he said slowly. "Five thousand is too small."

"You mean it was all a trick? He never intended to return your son?"

"Not today."

"It's all been a game of cat-and-mouse! To see if the mouse will turn!"

He gave a short, barking laugh. "That's a bit mixed!"

"You know what I mean."

"I think it's more than that. It's to show me that it's pointless to try and turn."

"What do we do now?" she asked helplessly.

"Go back and wait for the final demand." The words were clipped between clenched teeth. "I've already instructed Merryweather to sell fifty thousand."

"Fifty thousand!"

"I don't expect it'll be a penny less."

A flash of lightning streaked across the horizon. Thunder grumbled, rolling along the menace of the livid clouds. The air was thick and dry. The parched earth waited for the rain that didn't come.

Miranda walked at his side across the hotel courtyard. The skin stretched tightly over her bones as if it, too, yearned for the relief of rain.

The porter called her name from behind his desk.

"Yes?" She went towards him.

"There's a message for you, Mrs. Miller."

It was as if the lightning flashed along her nerves. The folded paper seemed to sear her fingers. She turned and walked across to Michael where he waited at the foot of the stairs. The paper crackled as she spread it out. They read together, heads close, not touching.

"Dear Mrs. Miller. The *Regina Rose* came back at half-past four. I tried to get you on the phone but you'd gone out so I sent you this note. Dobson."

She looked up at him with shining eyes. "Let's go!"

"Not so fast."

She was exasperated. "This is what we've been waiting for!" A muscle twitched at the edge of his jaw. She softened her voice. "Don't give in!" she urged. "They can't win all the time! This is *our* move."

"Is it? Why would they come back here? Why would the boat arrive precisely as we set out for Hastings?"

"I don't know! And I don't care! *This* message is from Dobson. *He's* on *our* side. They may be clever, but they couldn't know that we'd hear about it. Not so soon, anyway. Even if they *do* want us to go down to the harbour it won't be tonight! This is our chance to surprise them."

She saw her excitement leap up in his dulled eyes.

"You may be right. Wait here. I've got to get something."

He took the stairs two at a time. She watched him go, filling her eyes with the sight of him, swinging on the upward rise of the see-saw on which they balanced so precariously. When he had gone round the angle of the stairs she went into the cloakroom. She washed the sticky dirt from her hands. Fixed her face. Combed her hair. If this was to be the dénouement she intended to look her best.

He was in the hall when she came out. Her eyes ran over him and suspicion was sharp as an electric shock. She walked with him to the car and stood in front of him.

"It's a gun," she said, low and steady. "Isn't it?"

"Now why would I –"

She broke in. "Tell me."

His face was in shadow but she was conscious of a new hardness within him.

"Yes," he said. "It is a revolver."

A flash of lightning lit his face. It glared, white as a mask in which the eyes were black holes. Thunder beat the air into crashing echoes. Her blood ran cold.

"Must you take it?"

"Yes." In the return of darkness she was, momentarily, blind. His voice came to her, hollow, small after the deafening barrage of the thunder. "I have *you* to take care of."

"Not like that!"

"I won't use it. Unless I have to."

"And if I ask you to leave it in the car?"

He shook his head. "I'm taking it."

He moved away, round the car. She stood a moment, frozen by a terror that paralysed her will.

"Miranda –"

She saw his head and shoulders over the roof of the car.

"Give me the key. I'll go alone."

She tried to speak. Her throat contracted. She opened the door and slid in behind the wheel.

"Until this moment," she whispered in a strange, distorted voice, "I've been playing a game. No! Don't misunderstand me. Not exactly a game. Nothing was quite real. I felt I was living on borrowed time. I was numbed. I ought to be dead. It was as if I was acting a part in a play. Now . . ." She shivered. "Now I know it's not a game."

"No," he said quietly. "It's not a game. Or a play. We can't write the other man's part. We can only try and guess what he may do and try and protect ourselves."

The lightning was almost continuous. It flared across the flat landscape as they drove. Thunder rolled, peal upon peal, rocking the car, deadening the mind. And still, the rain held off. The air pressed down upon the earth, thick as ether, charged with electricity.

They came out on to the open space beside the harbour. The river was a pale snake whose mouth yawed at the sea. The lights in the pub window were golden.

"I'll ask Dobson where she's moored," Miranda said.

The public bar was warm and smoke-hazy. She wanted to stay, to forget the boat that waited for them on the water. She saw Dobson by the bar. She crossed and touched his arm.

"Mrs. Miller." His smile was easy but she felt no comfort. "You got my note."

"Where is *Regina Rose*?"

"You want to go aboard?" His eyebrows lifted, his eyes were bright with curiosity.

"If we may."

"I'll show you."

He moved towards the door. She followed. Michael was there as they stepped out into the sulphurous night.

Dobson raised his head, sniffing the air. "Rain's on its way." And to Michael: "There's no one aboard."

"You're sure?"

"Aye! Mrs. Bishop brought the *Regina Rose* in."

"And she's gone?"

"Aye. Mr. Bishop came for her in the car. You've only just missed them. Can't've been more than ten minutes ago."

"Are they coming back?"

He shook his head. "No. They paid me off. Said that as the weather's breaking up they wouldn't be wanting her any more." He stood, looking from one to the other. Miranda looked at Michael. Beneath the warm light from the open doorway his skin was grey.

"That's that," he grunted.

"If there's anything more I can do," Dobson began.

Miranda gave him a watery smile. "Just tell us where she's moored."

"You're still going aboard?"

"Please."

"Then she's along the path. This way."

"We'll find her," Miranda said quickly. "Don't bother to come."

He stopped. "Then I'll get back to my beer," he grinned.

"You do that! And thank you, again."

"It's nothing, Mrs. Miller."

She waited until he had gone back into the haze of the bar before she said "This way."

In between the flashes of lightning, as they moved towards the river's edge it, was as dark as pitch. Once, she stumbled. Michael's hand steadied her. What did she expect to find? She didn't know. She only knew that instinct was strong within her, driving her on.

She stepped up on to the wooden mooring path. Her heels tapped. In a flash of lightning, thunder breaking overhead, she saw the row of boats in vivid outline.

"There she is! Third along!"

Her pace quickened as the clouds burst and a sheet of water fell upon them. The drops were big. She bowed her head beneath the onslaught. It was difficult to breathe. The air was turned to liquid. In a few seconds her dress was soaked. It wrapped around her legs, clung to her body. She held the wooden rails, gasping, peering through rain-drenched lashes at the vaporous outline of the boat. His hand caught her elbow. "Let's get under cover."

He lifted her on to the prow of the boat. Rain drummed. Bounced off the deck. Head bent, she felt her way along the

gunwale, her fingers sliding off the water-sheeted roof of the cabin.

She skidded down the companion way. Pulled at the door. Stood, gasping, dripping water, shaking the rivulets from her face and head.

Michael stood at her side in the darkness. Rain drummed on the curved windows, beat a deafening tattoo on the low ceiling.

"Is there a lamp?" he asked.

Lightening filled the cabin, blazing against the wide front. Thunder crashed. The boat rocked on the swell.

"It's here."

He moved to the hanging storm-lantern. His lighter was a tiny flame. As he applied it to the wick the small cabin came slowly to life.

They looked round. It was tidy, orderly, empty.

"Well," he said, "That's the end of this wild goose chase!"

She was shaking in uncontrollable shudders. It wasn't only the rain-drenched dress, clinging to her in chilling caress. She knew that this wasn't the end. That there was a reason for the return of the *Regina Rose*. That there was something here for them to find.

"Let's look in the stern cabin."

She reached up and took the storm lantern from its hook. Moved past him, down the few steps. She held the lantern high as he squeezed in at her side. Shadows swung along the curving walls. A blanket covered something on the port side bunk beside the narrow table.

A scream began, deep within her. She felt it, a sharp twist of a knife. Heard it, high-pitched, echoing in her ears. No sound came out of her mouth.

The shadows steadied. The blanket was still. Horribly still above the small mound. On the pillow, gleaming, gathering into itself all the horror, all the terror of the past day, was the top of a small blond head. Motionless.

She stared at it, hypnotised, her eyes glazing. From the end of a long tunnel she heard Michael's cry as he squeezed past her. She mustn't faint. Mustn't add to his stricken despair.

Desperately, she fought for control. Forced the muscles of

her arm to hold the lantern high as he edged between table and bunk and bent over the blanket-huddled thing that she knew would never move again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He stood, staring down. She wanted to look away. Didn't want to see what his hands must reveal when they, finally, moved. Her eyes were glued to the smooth curve of the head. The head whose face was hidden by the blanket.

He moved. Her breath stopped in her lungs. In a sudden, unexpected gesture, he grabbed the blanket and flung it to the end of the bunk.

For a moment she was stunned. Her eyes saw the shape that curled, exposed, but her mind refused to accept their evidence. It was Michael's wild shout of laughter that broke the paralysis.

She edged between table and bunk. The shadows leaped as the lantern swung in her hand.

"It's a doll. On a pillow! How could they!" The words died.

"A doll!" He turned towards her. "A bloody doll!"

The hollows of his cheeks seemed to move with the swaying light. His eyes were brilliant with frenzied despair. His lips a thin line of violent hatred. He didn't see her.

"Michael!"

"I'll kill him!"

His hand thrust at her but she braced herself and held her ground.

"Michael!" She shouted at him, trying to pierce the madness of his anguish.

"I'll kill him for this!"

"Stop it!"

His body pressed against her, pushing her back. It was horrible in his unhurried persistence. She shrank from the eyes that didn't see her.

"Michael! It's me! Miranda! Don't you know me?"

"Let me out of here. I must find him. Out of my way."

Panic seized her as his hand pushed her back against the end of the bunk. She was falling. If he went she'd never catch him. The gun! With a movement that wrenched at the muscles of her back she slipped sideways from his hand and jerked upright. The sound of her own open palm against his face was sharp. His head snapped on his neck. He swayed. Shook his head. Blinked. Focused on her. The flame died.

"Miranda –"

It was a hesitating lonely, despairing appeal.

"It's all right! You're all right now!"

"I went crazy when I saw the doll. How could anyone do it?"

"Ssh! It's over."

"Oh, God – if it only were!"

Suddenly, he broke. His face seemed to fall apart. He slumped on to the edge of the bunk and buried his head in his hands.

She put the lantern on the table and sat at his side. She took his head in her arms, holding it close, cradling it, crooning words as if he were a child. Her heart filled with an almost unbearable pain of loving. His body shook beneath great tremors but no sound came from him. When, at last, he moved away, sitting up, holding her hands, his eyes were dry.

"Why?" he whispered "Why?"

Miranda shook her head helplessly.

"Taking Boy, like that, is bad enough. But this. . . ." His voice died.

"Perhaps," Miranda tried to comfort, "it wasn't Elizabeth."

"She must be in on it. She was here. Dobson saw her."

Miranda didn't answer. Could a face like that of the photograph conceal a woman who would play such a cruel trick? It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense.

The storm was rolling away. The rain had dwindled to a light pattering. She stiffened. Had she heard a sound, overhead, on the flat roof of the cabin. She gripped his hand.

"Listen!"

"What is it?"

Her ears strained. There was only the soft tantara of the rain.

"I thought I heard something."

"Miranda –"

"Yes?" She turned back to him.

"This probably isn't the moment. I haven't exactly played the part of the hero. No, don't say anything. I *know* how I behaved. Believe me, I'm not proud of myself!"

She trembled as he leaned towards her. She waited for the words she wanted, needed, so urgently, to hear.

A sound tore at her nerves. She twisted round in time to see the door slam shut.

Michael sprang on to the table. Bent double he was across it and on the floor.

"Who's there?"

He grabbed the handle. The door remained shut.

"Open up!"

He rattled the door in its sockets, shouting. There was no answer. Only the soft splash of the rain and the faint slap of the waves. He stopped shaking the door and turned to face her, his lips twisted in a wry grimace.

"You *did* hear something," he said.

There was no sound of footsteps on the deck overhead. Her ears ached with listening. The silence was uncanny. She was cold. The wet dress clung to her body.

The shock of their discovery had abated but the horror increased. There was no reason for the cruel trick. Michael was prepared to pay the ransom – so why did Bishop fake the child's death? And why lock them in? It was the action of a madman.

"Well," Michael spoke with forced brightness, "it looks as if we're here for some time."

A spasm of shivering shook her from head to toe. She was chilled to the bone. Her teeth chattered.

"You're cold."

She tried to smile. "I don't think I'll ever be warm again."

"Yes, you will. Come on, off with your dress."

She was, unexpectedly, shy. "I – I can't," she stuttered.

"Don't be an idiot! This is no time for the conventions!"

"Dobson'll come and let us out."

He looked at his watch. "Not before closing time. That's

just on two hours. Time enough to work up a good dose of pneumonia. You can wrap yourself in a blanket. I'll play the gentleman and look the other way!"

"This seems to be turning into a habit!"

She swallowed a giggle, controlled the hysterical urge to laugh as she looked at his broad back, so resolutely turned towards her.

"Hurry up! I can't stand straight in this boat."

She pulled at her zip. Struggled out of the clinging dress. Took the blanket from the end of the bunk and draped it closely around her, leaving one shoulder bare.

"That's a relief!" He moved and sat on the end of the table, facing her. A smile softened the taut lines of his face. "And how's my Indian squaw tonight?"

She knew the effort it cost him to reach for humour. A wave of tenderness loosened the tension of her own nerves.

"Hungry!" she grimaced.

He spread open hands. "Sorry!" The smile broadened. "No moose. All gone to the far lands." His hands went to his pocket. "Try a cigarette."

"I think I will."

He selected one for her, put it between her lips, lit it. She drew the smoke into her lungs and choked. Coughing, eyes smarting, she said: "I'm not very good at it."

"Look! Like this!"

Smoke curled from his nostrils. She tried again. It was rough but comforting. He watched her, smiling.

"Good girl! That's the idea!"

"You must be wet, too."

"Only my jacket. I'll take it off."

He flung it on the end of her bunk and moved over to the other one. He lay on his back and held out his arms to her. She went to him. He twisted sideways as she lay beside him on the narrow berth. His arm was round her, holding her against his shoulder.

Warmth grew between them. The rain pattered and the little boat rocked on the tide. Beneath her ear his heart beat a low, steady rhythm.

"Whoever it was," she murmured, "who locked us in, at this moment I've no complaints."

His arm tightened. "Nor I."

"Who do you think it was?"

He drew in a deep breath. "The farther we get, the more confusing it grows. At first it seemed a plain case of kidnapping. Now, it looks as if someone's got a personal grudge against me."

"But why?"

"Let's forget it. There's nothing we can do until Dobson comes to our rescue."

"I can't stop thinking about it."

"Yes, you can."

"How?"

"I'll tell you a story."

She laughed uncertainly. "A story?"

"Once upon a time there was a dog and a shirt –"

"A shirt!"

"Be quiet! Listen! The dog was called Dumbledore, the shirt, Solly. . . ."

His voice was low. It must be a story he had told his son. It was as if, subtly, he was telling her something else. He could have made love to her. It would have needed no more than a single kiss for passion to flare up between them. For strain and tension to find ease and forgetfulness in love-making.

But he hadn't kissed her. Instead, he held her close and told her a child's story. Was he hesitating because of her previous rejection? Was he waiting for her to make the first move? Or was it, simply, that he was telling her that he wasn't in love with her?

The words began to run into each other, into the splash of rain and wave. She felt him take the cigarette from her fingers but she didn't open her eyes, only lay still in his arms. She was too tired to fathom the meaning of his actions. She was drifting on the slow rise and fall of his voice. On the slow rise and fall of the boat.

She jerked back to consciousness. Sat up, listening, feeling the action of the boat in every nerve.

"What is it?"

"We're adrift."

"Adrift!"

He knelt on the bunk and lifted the curtain from the porthole. It was a black circle.

"I can't see anything."

She slid to the end of the bunk. "We must get out. We'll never make it over the bar at the river mouth without the engine."

He dropped the curtain and stared at her helplessly. "The door opens inwards. I can't get enough of a run to break it down."

"Maybe there's something in the locker."

She grabbed the storm lantern and dumped it on the floor. She put her hands under the end of the table and thrust it up against the wall. He was on his knees at her side as she pulled at the round handle of the drawer.

"Blankets! Try the other side."

They twisted, together. The deep drawer revealed an assortment of tools. He snatched at a hammer and strode to the door. The sound of splintering wood, the sight of the white gashes held her paralysed. Air came in through the growing space. It flicked at her bare shoulder with icy cobwebs. She dropped the blanket and struggled into her wet dress as he put a hand through the opening and turned the key.

The boat was rocking, lurching uneasily. A wave caught it, sideways, and sent her stumbling across the rake of the floor.

"Quick," she cried. "Let's hope they've left enough fuel in the tank."

She grabbed the lantern and was up the steps and in the front cabin before him.

She put the lantern on its hook. The boat slewed round beneath the mounting pressure of the waves, lurching sluggishly, heeling at a disquieting angle.

Her fingers moved quickly, methodically. The engine spat. Stammered. Stopped. Spat again. And caught.

She laughed aloud as she felt the boat respond to the pressure of her hands on the wheel. She touched a switch and a beam of light sprang out above her head. It fell on a dazzling curtain of raindrops.

And something else. A dark shadow, solid beyond the blinding rain. Too close. The laughter died. She swung the wheel. The shadow that was land skidded sideways. Slowly. Desperately slowly. The deck beneath her shuddered as the keel touched the bar of sand. She held her breath. For a heart-shaking moment the heel dragged, sluggish, the wheel was unresponsive between her gripping fingers. With a lurch and a wallow they floated free.

"We're too near the mouth," she said. "We'll have to go out before we can turn."

He was at her side. His hand touched hers on the wheel.

"You're the skipper," he said quietly.

She glanced at the fuel-gauge. "It'll be touch and go."

"You'll make it."

The boat rose beneath them as she came head on to the swell at the river mouth. Fell into the trough between the waves that swept out of the blackness, rising, momentarily, into the beam of light, flowing beneath them.

The action steadied. The strain went out of her wrists. She swung the *Regina Rose* in a wide circle and began the return journey.

"It's all right now," she said, drawing in a deep breath.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MIRANDA LOOKED at the doll where it sat on a chair in her bedroom. Pink-cheeked, chubby arms and legs protruding stiffly from the white nylon dress, it returned her look with bland indifference.

"If only you could speak!" she cried at it.

The ruby lips pouted, silent. Miranda went to the dressing-table and began to brush her hair. The storm had gone with the night. Now, the sun blazing from a cloudless sky, it seemed as if both storm and events were unreal. Was this why she had brought the doll? Concrete evidence that it had all, unbelievably, happened?

Her hands poised. She saw the blonde head in the mirror and her heart quickened.

It was a girl-doll. But the hair had been clipped for last night's drama.

She dropped the brush and crossed quickly to lift the doll in her hands. It was a professional job. The hair was smoothly fashioned against the head. Maybe, the doll *was* speaking to her! This haircut was not the result of heedless chopping. Who had done it? Certainly not Bishop. Nor Rupert or Derek. Elizabeth? She shook her head at the doll. None of the facts she knew about the woman supported the idea.

There was only one hairdresser in the town. She would go there. Now. She wouldn't tell Michael. If she discovered nothing, it would be her own let-down.

She tucked the doll under her arm, grabbed her bag and hurried along the landing. At breakfast he had been strained and silent. Had said: "I'm lousy company. I'll wait in my room for Bishop's next move."

Her thoughts winged towards him as she passed his door. Maybe, *this* was the next move! They couldn't wait for Bishop to show his hand. It was patently obvious that the man was embarked on a battle of nerves. There was one thing in their favour. Bishop didn't know that they had already discovered the thing he had left for them in *Regina Rose*.

She stopped short at the bottom of the stairs. Or did he? Was that why he hadn't communicated with Michael? Had the unknown person who had locked them in and set them adrift told him of their night's experience? She felt trapped. Whichever way they turned, whatever action they took, it led nowhere. Bishop was everywhere. Knew everything. They moved in his shadow. Waited for him to pounce. It was a disturbing sensation. As if he destroyed their individuality. Deprived them of free-will.

She shook herself. She mustn't let the inexplicable events of the night fill her with hysterical fantasies. He was only a man. A man who wanted money. Ruthless in his obsession. But, still, a creature of flesh and blood. Vulnerable.

She was moving across the hall when Michael appeared at her side.

"I can't sit doing nothing," he said. "Will you drive me to see Mrs. O'Keefe?"

She hesitated. He gave her a searching look.

"What are you doing with that doll?"

"I've an idea –"

He broke in curtly: "You have too many ideas!"

She flushed. Holding herself stiffly, she said: "I'm sorry."

"Don't take any notice of me. I told you I was lousy company!"

"You take the car. I can walk. I'm not going far."

"You're not going to do anything silly?"

"Of course not!"

"No rushing in where angels fear to tread?"

"What does that mean?"

She searched his face, trying to fathom the emotion behind his words. He smiled at her but his eyes were blank. There was resolution. A disquieting constraint. As if, deliberately, he withheld himself from her. There was an impatience in his movements as he swung round and strode across the hall. She followed uncertainly. Beside the car he turned, suddenly, looking down at her.

"What am I going to do about you?"

"About me?"

He shook his head at her. His tone was light but his brows creased. "You're a menace!"

"If you don't want me –"

He broke in, giving her arm a shake. "Don't get on your high horse! I worry about you. You have the most incredible knack of running into trouble."

"I only try to help," she said stiffly. "It seems to me that as I know these people –"

"But do you?" He slid his hand down her arm and held her hand. "Now, be a good girl and stay out of things. Just for one morning. I've done a lot of thinking. Last night could have been dangerous. I've got enough to worry about without adding you to my problems." He gave her hand a quick, impatient shake. "Let me deal with it my own way."

The blazing light was ruthless. It brought out every detail

of his face. It was the face of a stranger. He turned and got into the car.

"Good-bye!" she said, not smiling, looking in at the window.

"Remember what I've said, Miranda. I mean it."

The car shot away. She followed, slowly, down the cobbled road. In a few minutes she stood outside the hairdressers. She hesitated. His words were cold within her. Was this his way of giving her her marching orders? Last night, in his arms, she had believed that his restraint was due to concern for herself. Had she misread him? Was it simply that he had no love for her? That he wanted to be rid of her and didn't know how to do it?

The doll hurt her ribs as the muscles in her arm tightened. She moved towards the door. It was her own business if she wanted to find out the identity of the person who had set them adrift. She was a free agent. He had no right to tell her what she could do!

The door clicked. As she walked to the reception desk, her eyes raked the inner room. Half of it was concealed beyond looped, lavender curtains.

"Good morning, madam. Can I help you?"

"I'd like to make an appointment."

"Yes, madam. Who with?"

She didn't know. It was a hopeless quest.

"Do you prefer a man or a girl?"

"I don't really know."

There was activity in the inner room. Girls in lavender nylon overalls moved about among the customers. She searched their faces with growing despondency.

"Can I suggest Monsieur Henri?"

She must get into that room. "Can he do it now?"

"Now?" The receptionist was shocked. "Oh no, madam. He's our first assistant. If you want it done now. . . ."

Her eyes scanned the appointment book.

Someone was coming towards her, across the inner room. Miranda stiffened. There was something familiar about the girl's teetering walk, her mop of brown hair. Her guess had been right! The doll's haircut was a professional job. The girl

hadn't seen her. She stood, now, with her back turned, helping a large woman into a white dustcoat.

The receptionist was talking to her, waiting, pencil poised, eyebrows raised.

"I'm sorry," Miranda said, glancing at her, looking back into the room, waiting for the moment when the girl would see her. "I didn't hear what you said."

The receptionist began again, in a tone of scarcely concealed impatience. "There's no one in this morning. If you like. . . ."

Miranda stopped listening. The customer was coming through the archway with its draped, lavender curtains. The girl was short, her face concealed behind the broad expanse of the woman's shoulders. Was she following? Miranda felt a leap of excitement as she saw the flare of the overall. She held the doll in front of her, its head against her shoulder, and braced herself.

The woman moved to the desk. Miranda was face to face with the girl. There was no doubting the other's reaction. She stopped short. Her eyes widened. Her mouth dropped. The colour fled from her face.

Miranda moved quickly forward. "So it *was* you!" she said, her voice low with triumph.

She saw the effort it took for Polly to raise her eyes from the doll's head.

"M – me?" she stammered.

Miranda thrust the doll towards her. Polly took a step backwards and Miranda moved close again.

"Why did you do it?" she thrust fiercely.

"I – I don't know what you're talking about."

"This!" She pushed the clipped head of the doll against the girl's lavender overall, and a surge of exultant laughter rose within her as she saw her try and evade the contact.

Polly straightened. Her cheeks were a deathly white but the panic had gone from her eyes.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about," she said. "If you'll excuse me, I've a customer –"

Miranda grabbed her arm as she moved. She was aware of the other two women, watching her, but it was as if they were at a far distance. Nothing had reality but the strange trio of herself, the girl Polly, and the doll.

"Listen to me," she said, her voice low. "If Derek and you had anything to do with last night. . . ."

Something flickered in the wide, blue eyes that stared back at her. A dark flame that set fire to her own nerves. She dug her nails into the girl's bare arm and rejoiced at the sight of a bitten lip.

"Let go of me!" Polly whispered.

"Not till you tell me –"

She broke in. "There's nothing to tell. I don't know nothing about it."

"About what?" Miranda pounced.

"About this crazy doll!" Her nostrils twitched but she had regained her self-control. She smiled indolently. "I'm busy." She lifted her arm. "Do you mind?"

Miranda's hand dropped to her side. The girl gave her a broad, mocking smile and drifted away. She watched her go, bare legs brown beneath the knee-length skirt, teetering on high heels. Every line of her back was an insolent rejection.

"Madam. . . ."

She turned towards the desk. Both women eyed her with suspicion.

The laugh broke free. "I'm *not* mad!" she exclaimed, and walked quickly from the shop.

The doll was hard against her breast. She loosened her grip and held it, dangling by one arm. She certainly wasn't mad. But was she quite sane? Had the reasonless events of the past days removed her from reality so that she saw guilt in Polly's eyes when none was there? She tried to stand apart from herself, to see herself as the other girl had seen her. The picture was disquieting. It had been enough to rouse fear in Polly's face even if she were innocent. Fear – but not guilt.

She stopped and looked back. The woman in white had followed her out of the shop and now hurried past with carefully averted face. She crushed the urge to run after her, to explain the facts and ask for reassurance. There was no assurance, anywhere. She could only go back to the hotel and go on with this endless waiting.

If she had the car she would go out to the tram. At least, there, she could make contact with reality. The simple actions

of washing the cups, tidying the place where she had once, incredibly, been able to be at ease, pulled at her. She couldn't go back to the hotel, couldn't face the long hours without action. She needed to be alone to adjust herself.

She would walk. She could thumb a lift.

The sun blazed down on her head. Her eyes ached. The doll, on which she had pinned so much hope, swung from one hand, her bag from the other. Several cars passed without heeding her signal. The feeling of unreality grew. She walked in a daze. At last, a small, dilapidated, open Morris drew to a standstill in response to her thumb.

A face loomed out of the haze in front of her eyes. A faintly familiar face. The woman at the hairdresser's.

"Want a lift?"

"Thank you."

Miranda sank on to the seat. It was hot through her thin dress.

The woman said: "You look all in. Where are you trying to go?"

"To my tram." She felt the woman stiffen at her side. "It's all right. I really do have a tram. In the fields. It's lonely – but I need to be alone."

"You seem to me to need someone to keep you company. Tell you what – I live near here. I'll take you home and get a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor!" Miranda said wearily. "Maybe a policeman . . ." The words died. It was too great an effort to talk.

"In trouble?"

She didn't answer.

"Perhaps I can help. I'm a J.P. We'll have a coffee and you can tell me all about it."

Miranda looked straight ahead. "You think I'm crazy."

"You're obviously not quite yourself. That scene at Maison Henri – what was it all about?"

The long sea-road slid beneath the bonnet. The woman was kind. Strong. Maybe she could help.

"It's this doll."

"I gathered that!"

"It seemed – I thought it might help."

"Help?"

"Give me a clue. Make contact. Get us out of his shadow."

"I understand." The woman's voice was too controlled, too calm, too soothing.

Miranda sat up. "There's my tram!"

The car accelerated. "I'm taking you home with me."

The controlled, calm, soothing voice was a threat.

"No. Stop. Please, stop."

"I think it'd be best for you if . . ."

The tram was moving past them. "If you don't stop" – Miranda put a hand on the lever of the door – "I'll get out."

"Don't be a silly girl!"

"I mean it!"

She pressed the lever down. Pushed the door against the air. The car slowed. Stopped. Miranda got out. The doll was cradled in her arm. She felt its hair, cool against her neck.

"Thank you," she said. "And don't worry about me."

The woman's face was full of concern. "Are you going to stay here?"

Miranda shook her head. She tried to smile, tried to sound natural, but her lips were stiff and her voice was harsh.

"Only a few minutes. I have to wash the cups."

"I see."

There was purpose in the cool, grey eyes.

"Don't send any doctor," Miranda said. "It'll be a waste of time. A friend is coming for me."

"I never meant –"

"Yes, you did. Thank you, but I'll be all right. It's the heat."

The woman broke into a smile. "Well – good-bye."

"Good-bye."

The car moved away. Miranda watched it. The woman waved but Miranda made no response. She turned and walked quickly across the road. Along the grass verge. Climbed the stile and went up the steps.

The tram was full of a soft, creamy light. She closed the door behind her and went into the curtained room. She put the doll on the bed and picked up the cups.

Slowly, very slowly, a feeling of peace welled up within her. She washed the cups and swept the powdered dust of the aspirin from where she had spilled it on the floor. When she had finished she lay on the second bed.

The sea washed against the shore in slumberous rhythmic swish and drag. Her limbs were heavy. Her head felt the size of a pumpkin. Within its hard exterior the soft matter surged gently to and fro on the suck and dawdle of the waves. Each beat of her heart sent it moving, backwards and forwards, in great surges of helpless frustration. It was as if she had been beaten and now lay, throbbing with the memory of the lash.

She fell into an uneasy sleep. The swell and fall of passing cars mingled in her tortured dreams. The sound of her watch ticked in her ear where her hand cradled her face. It was an ominous sound. Sharp with warning. She ought to get up. Ought to leave this sanctuary. The woman's face bellied into her dreams. Swollen to nightmare size, it filled her with panic. A voice began. Low and eerie, swelling to sinister volume, thundering in her head.

"Mad, of course! Quite mad! I'll certify her, now."

She jerked upright. Her heart was thudding violently. Had she heard footsteps? The nightmare possessed her. She didn't know if she were asleep or awake.

The door moved suddenly. Light dazzled her. Sweat broke out. She swung her legs to the floor but couldn't stand up. Her fingers gripped the edge of the bed as a shape loomed against the light. A man. A man who came in and shut the door behind him.

The nightmare sensation persisted. She knew that she was awake, but she couldn't move. Could only watch paralysed, hypnotised, as he came towards her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"YOU!" SHE WHISPERED, her voice cracking.

"Me," Bishop agreed. "Surprised?"

"How did you know I was here?"

He shook his head at her as if she were a small, foolish child. "Don't you know yet that I know everything you do?"

Thoughts whirled. The woman in white, a stranger, picked up on the road? Polly? But Polly didn't know she was coming to the tram. She gave up the struggle. He was here. It didn't matter *how*. Her head cleared. In a moment of ice-cold clarity she realised that she was alone with him. Alone with the man she had come to regard with an almost fanatical loathing. Fear pricked her scalp.

He sat on the other bed, his knees spread wide, his hands loosely clasped between them. As he leaned towards her one knee touched hers. She drew away from the contact as if she had touched a flame.

"Relax, Miranda!"

Her flesh crawled beneath the smooth caress in her name.

"What do you want?"

With an effort she dragged her eyes from his. The doll sprawled at his side, innocent and charged with danger. As if he knew her thoughts he put out a hand and lifted it on to his lap. Its head rested against his olive-green shirt, the hair was bright beneath the open V. The man's arm was around its waist, bare and pale, beneath the sprinkling of red hairs, the muscles rippling as he clasped it to him.

"Aren't you too old for dolls?" he grinned.

"*You* can say that!" She choked on the words. "Tell me what you want and get out."

"Now is that friendly?"

"I don't feel friendly! If you've nothing to say – *I'll* go."

"Not yet."

He made no move. His voice was quiet. But she began to tremble. The walls of the tram seemed to close in upon her. It was only a few steps to the door but she knew she'd never reach it. "I'll give you five minutes," she said coldly.

"That's better." His teeth gleamed as he smiled. "It's time that you and I had a talk."

"There's only one thing I have to say to you. You're a –"

He broke in, without raising his voice, without passion. "Easy now! Hard names won't help the situation."

"They'll help my feelings!"

"Maybe." He paused. His long white fingers rested on the doll's neck Above the encircling flesh, blue eyes stared ahead, ruby lips pouted He leaned a little forwards, pressing against the doll's head. "But it won't help Sheridan get his son back"

Her anger died. And fear. She sat bolt upright. Looked him straight in the face. This was what she had been scheming for. This was *her* opportunity. She could go back to Michael with something concrete. He would no longer think of her as a "menace" and a "problem".

"How could you do it?" she asked softly.

He shrugged. "The child's all right."

"And the father? Have you no feeling for him!"

"He'd have his son back now if he'd played straight."

"Played straight!" She was on her feet, staring down at him. "What about last night?"

"Sit down!"

His voice lashed at her. It wasn't loud but it carried an undertone of violence.

"Sit down. I haven't finished with you yet."

Her legs gave way. Trembling, she sank on to the edge of the bed.

"Last night . . ." His voice reached for her with icy tentacles, wrapping her round in a frozen immobility "Last night was nothing to do with me."

Her eyes locked with his. Her mind was stunned.

"You're lying," she whispered. "You were there. Dobson told us."

"As he told you that the *Regina Rose* was back in harbour?"

She nodded, unable to gather her thoughts.

"You're a very silly girl," he said softly. "That's why I had to talk to you, alone. Sheridan and I understand one another. If you keep out of this, we'll reach an arrangement." His voice dropped even lower. "If you hadn't followed me yesterday, it would be over."

Out of her confusion one thought was clear. She had hated this man for what he had done to Michael; now, she realised, her loathing was personal.

"You set Rupert on me!" she cried.

His eyebrows lifted in two sharp curves. "It was in public.

He couldn't do much."

"He kissed me!" Her lips crawled at the memory.

Bishop stroked the doll's clipped head with sensuous suggestion. "I might have sent him here, now," he mused.

Her eyes followed the action of his fingers. She shivered. "Even that wouldn't be so vile a thing as making Michael believe you had killed his child!"

In a sudden movement that jarred her nerves, he flung the doll from him. It sprawled on the bed, legs and arms sticking up into the air.

"I told you," he said in the soft voice that was so much more frightening than open antagonism, "I had nothing to do with that."

"But you know about it!"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

He didn't answer. In the creamy light his face was like a wax mask. She wanted to strike at it. Her fists clenched, the nails cutting the palms.

"I'll tell you!" she cried. "It was Polly."

"Polly?" He was untouched. "Who's Polly?"

"You know very well! She cut that doll's hair. It was Polly who put it in the *Regina Rose*. Polly who set us adrift."

"You seem to know a great deal," he mocked.

"I'm beginning to know some things." She leaned towards him staring into green eyes with gold flecks. Cat's eyes, cold, expressionless. "Supposing I tell Elizabeth?"

"Tell Elizabeth?"

No flicker of emotion touched his face, but she knew that her thrust had gone home.

"About you and Polly!" she cried, exultant.

He stared at her for a long moment. It seemed that the thudding of her heart filled the silence.

His laugh was a shock. He flung back his head and roared with laughter. The noise ran like flames over her skin. Terror seized her. It was crazy laughter. It bounced against the walls and rocked the narrow room.

With her hands pressed over her ears she pushed past his outspread legs. She reached the door. The metal bar was in

her fingers. His hand gripped her arm. She stumbled backwards at its jerk. Her head hit the edge of the narrow opening. It seemed as if it split open. Light blazed along the jagged edges. Pain shot it apart.

She fell, sprawling on to the bed. Beyond the pain and the shooting fireworks display she saw his face, close to hers. The eyes blazed, two green-gold spotlights. His breath was hot on her cheek. The sound of it, loud in her ears.

"You fool! Won't you ever learn!"

"Never!" She flung the word at him from clenched teeth. "Never! As long as you keep the boy – I'll go on."

"And as long as you encourage Sheridan to try and wriggle out of paying – I'll go on."

She went cold. "So you *do* want more. He said you did."

He straightened. Ran a hand across his hair.

"I told you – Sheridan and I understand each other! Go back and tell him – this time – I want forty-five thousand."

She stared at him. Was it possible that the two men *did* have a peculiar mental affinity? Would Michael be better off without her?

"Did you hear me?"

She tried to sit up but the pain made her dizzy.

"That's the exact figure Michael named."

"He's no fool!" There was an unwilling admiration in his voice. He bent over her again, fixing her, pressing her back against the bed with his gaze. "This time – no funny business. Don't forget – *I* have the child."

She held on to her ebbing courage. "Another trip to the newsagent?" she mocked.

He didn't speak. Just looked at her with his cold penetrating calculation.

"Tell him to keep *you* out of it," he said. "Tell him I'll deal with him, alone. Tell him to be at the phone box at nine o'clock tonight."

"Tonight!"

"Deeds of darkness should be performed in darkness," he mocked her. And added, quietly: "Tell him, if he does as I say, he'll have his son back by midnight."

"If not?" she whispered.

"If not, if he rates you as important as the boy . . ." He straightened. "I shall have to think again, won't I?"

"Are you threatening *me*?"

He shrugged. "I intend to have that money. The boy was enough to bargain with until you came into the picture."

"You won't find it so easy to kidnap me." In spite of herself her voice shook.

"Did I say anything about kidnapping?"

Even as he spoke he was moving to the door. It jerked sideways. A beam of sunlight set fire to his hair. He jumped down the short flight of steps. She struggled up on one elbow. Watched him mount the stile. Run down the rutted path with an easy, swinging grace. Get into his waiting car.

He was gone. She stared at the empty road. The air was hot through the open door but she was cold. The tram was full of his presence. His threat hovered. Her head throbbed. The long walk back along the sea-road was beyond her capacities. What could she say to Michael? What would he say to her? Tears welled up. Trickled out of her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She knew what he would say.

She had lost him.

Even when he got his son back there would be this barrier between them. They would never be able to break it down. He would have to choose. The answer was inevitable. It would set them apart. He would feel guilty towards her. She would be aware of her own failure. This was the end of her dream. This was the reality she had sought.

Through the mist she saw a car draw to a standstill. She sat up, dabbing at her eyes. Grabbing her bag she ran to the door.

"Howard! Howard!"

He was coming towards her. She stumbled down the slope, over the stile, and fell into his arms. He half-carried, half-led her along the path. He asked no questions.

"I saw someone leave," he said, putting her into the car. "When I saw the door open I wondered what the devil was going on."

The door of the tram was still open. The doll inside. It didn't matter. She wanted to get away.

Howard came round to his side of the car. "I've been trying

to catch up with you," he said. "Where've you been? Has Sheridan got his boy back?"

She told him. The words rushed out, falling over each other. She told him everything but Bishop's threat. As she talked, he listened, his round face creased with anger. She fell, slowly, into a chill, dark certainty.

"I said he should have got the police in the first place," Howard snapped. "This is no job for amateurs."

"I'm beginning to agree."

"Then we'll go back and tell him so."

"No," she said softly.

"*I* will! It's not right! He shouldn't let you be involved."

"Don't worry about me. I'm bowing out."

He gave her a sharp look. "If I could believe that –"

"You can. I've had my marching orders."

"From him?"

She hesitated. It wasn't true yet, but it would be. "From Michael," she said.

"Then I'll say no more. Except, would you like to move over to Burke House?"

She didn't answer. To leave would be final.

"Miranda," he urged. "You need someone to look after you. You've been through enough for this man. You need to be quiet. If he's told you what you say he has, get right out of it."

"I must get my things. Will you drive me back?"

"Of course."

The car moved off. She ought to be grateful to Howard for his unquestioning offers of help, but she felt only a great emptiness.

They drove into the courtyard of The Old Mill. She looked quickly at the row of cars. If Michael were back, if she saw him, her purpose might falter. Her car wasn't there. The last opening was closed.

"I'll wait here," Howard said.

"I won't be a moment."

She hurried through the hall and up to her room. It was a matter of seconds to bundle her few dresses into the suitcase. She clicked it shut. She must leave a message.

She carried the case and left it in the hall. She went into

the writing-room. Sat at a desk. Took a sheet of paper and the Biro from her bag.

Dear Michael, she wrote, and stared at the words. Dear, dear Michael! She stiffened and wrote, rapidly, telling him of Bishop's new arrangement.

She stopped again, the pen poised. And of herself? What could she say of herself? There must be no weakening. It was *she* who had made the choice for him. She mustn't let him know the reason behind the choice.

She wrote: Forgive me, if you can, for running away. I suppose I'm a coward. You said yourself that it took more courage to live than to die. It seems I'm lacking in that virtue.

Her purpose faltered. She couldn't walk out of his life without telling him the truth. Or, at least, some part of it.

For a while, she wrote, I thought that you and I could mean something to each other. Maybe, one day, if we should meet again. . . . Think of me kindly, if you can. I tried. Really I did. I shall be thinking of you tonight. And praying for you.

The words, I love you, threatened to write themselves. Quickly, fiercely, she signed her name. Folded the sheet without reading what she had written. Thrust it into the envelope. The taste of the gum was bitter. Her tongue was dry. She had to search her mouth for moisture.

It was done. She wrote his name and carried the envelope into the hall.

"Will you give this to Mr. Sheridan." Her voice gave no hint of the sick misery within her.

"Certainly Mrs. Miller. Mr. Burke said not to worry about the bill. He'd see you himself."

She became aware that the porter was looking at her, waiting for her to speak. She said: "Thank you," and moved, her legs leaden, forcing herself away from the desk. She picked up her suitcase and walked out of the hotel. Out of his life.

Slumped low in the seat, her eyes closed, she didn't see him, driving up the hill as they drove down. And Howard, who did see, kept his lips angrily closed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BURKE HOUSE, Howard's other hotel, was on top of a hill that fell away along steep downland to sheer cliffs.

He led her to a small room. The window framed an expanse of sparkling water. The brilliance hurt her eyes. She turned away from it and sank on to the edge of the bed.

"You lie down," he said.

Tears welled up at the tenderness in his voice. "My head aches."

"I'll get you some aspirin."

"No! Not aspirin –"

He gave her a quick look but only said: "I'll be back in a minute."

She sat with her hands in her lap, staring into space. When he returned she took the pills and gulped them down. He took the glass and hesitated.

"Thank you, Howard." She tried to put gratitude into her voice but it was without life.

He said slowly: "There's something I have to tell you."

"Yes?" He seemed to be a long way away. She had to make an effort to hear his voice.

"I don't want you to come upon him without warning –"

Warning? What could touch her now?

"Rupert is here."

The words etched themselves in her exhausted mind. She should feel some response. She felt nothing.

"In the bar. You've no need to see him. His mother is my housekeeper. She asked me to take him on. He's been in and out of jobs since he left school. More out than in! She wanted to keep an eye on him." He gave a short bark of a laugh. "I think she has some kind of an idea that I may provide a spot of fatherly control! But I doubt if he'll stay long. He's an uneasy, restless lad. Got a devil of a chip on his shoulder! One can almost see the long arm of the law resting on it!" He moved, bustling, to the door. "I talk too much! If you want

anything to eat, ring. I'll tell Mrs. Wilson to look after you." He threw her a cheerful grin. "It may help you to understand the situation if you know that 'Mrs.' is a courtesy title. If Mr. Wilson ever existed – he's been a-long-time-no-see!"

He closed the door quietly. So Rupert was a "broken home" product. Maybe illegitimate. Fertile soil for today's juvenile delinquent. It didn't matter. Michael had gone out of her life. Rupert was no longer important.

She moved to the window, pulled the curtains against the glare. Dragged back to the bed. Lay down, as she was, in her dress. There was no reason, now, to care if it got creased.

Michael. His name echoed round the room. Echoed along the empty future. Echoed in the place where her heart still beat, a machine that opened and shut, propelling the blood through her veins, a hollow place without hope.

She twisted on the bed and buried her face in the pillow. There were no tears. She was beyond the relief of weeping. There was only sleep. She lay, motionless, waiting for the deliverance of oblivion.

The knock on the door penetrated slowly. She pressed her head deeper into the pillow, refusing its intrusion. The sharp rat-a-tat-tat bit into sleep, cutting a path, drawing her back to consciousness.

"Yes?" she called without moving.

"Telephone, Mrs. Miller." A woman's voice.

She sat up. Michael! She had called "I'm coming," before she knew the impossibility of her own, sleep-vulnerable hope.

She didn't nurry. She drew back the curtains. Sea and sky trembled beneath a rose-tinted, shimmering veil. Just above the horizon a wash of green, so delicate, so translucid, it held her spell-bound. Even as she watched the colour changed, deepened, flushed.

She looked at her watch. She had slept the day away. What had Michael done with the hours? Had he received her note? Was he relieved? Or was he distressed? She shook the thoughts from her. Somehow, she must find a way to go on without him. Must keep watch at the door of thought, refuse him admission.

She brushed her hair upwards from her neck; and cried

aloud. The throbbing had gone while she slept and she had forgotten. Gingerly, the tips of her fingers tested the lump. The skin was unbroken but pain leaped.

She picked up her handbag. She had lost even the pride in her own appearance. The lipstick had gone from the centre of her lips leaving a streak of colour round the edges, but she made no attempt to re-colour them. Tears – had she been able to cry? – and sleep had smudged mascara. She left it there, sable shadows above which her eyes looked back at her, the pupils enlarged, black and empty spaces.

She turned away. Walked across and opened the door. A woman smiled at her. A short, slender woman whose grey hair belied the youth in her features. A feminine replica of Rupert.

"Mrs. Wilson?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were waiting."

"Not to worry! Mr. Burke said to look after you. You sounded so sleepy I thought I'd better be sure you came. The person on the phone was very insistent."

"Thank you."

Stiffly, Miranda smiled. Stiffly, she followed the slender back along the passage.

"I've had the call put through to my room. You'll be quiet there."

Again, the stiff, emotionless: "Thank you."

Mrs. Wilson led her along a short passage. Up a flight of stairs, a few paces to the left, a turn to the right and along another passage to the top of the stairs. She hadn't realised, on her way in, how far in the angle of the hotel her own room was situated. Down the flight of stairs, beyond the bathroom and the adjoining lavatory, it was isolated, removed from the nearest visitor. A faint flutter of feeling. It was thoughtful of Howard to put her where she wanted to be, alone and out of hearing.

Mrs. Wilson opened a door. Ushered her in. "Mr. Burke says will you go to his sitting-room when you're ready."

The door shut. Miranda lifted the receiver from the table. Through the open window she heard the voices of boys play-

ing, shrill and happy. In the instrument at her ear she heard the sound of breathing, soft and quick.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"It's me."

"Who?"

"Polly."

"Polly!" An electric shock jerked her upright.

"I've got to see you."

The tension drained out of her. She slipped down on to the edge of a hard chair.

"There's no point, now."

"I must! Please, Mrs. Miller! I've got to!"

The voice was breathless, urgent, very young, very frightened. Miranda yielded to its unnerving, hurried pleading.

"If it's really important–"

"It is! Believe me, it is!"

"Where are you?"

"In the box near The Old Mill."

For a moment Miranda saw her pressed against the back of the familiar booth, hand cupped around the receiver, eyes scanning the street. The impression was so vivid that she had to drag her attention back to the voice that whispered so urgently in her ear.

"They told me you'd left. I didn't know what to do. I waited outside the hotel. Mr. Sheridan came back just now and I asked him. But he didn't know. I was on my way home when I remembered Mr. Burke's other hotel."

Miranda crushed the leap of her heart. Bit on the longing to ask questions, to know how he looked, to hear what he said.

"I've got no car," she said shortly.

"I've a bicycle."

"My room's number eighteen."

"No! Not there! At the coastguard's hut."

"I know it." She looked at her watch. "Make it nine o'clock."

Abruptly she slammed down the receiver. It wasn't until later that she remembered the girl's half-finished sentence.

Nine! It was as if the figure were printed on her mind in scarlet letters. Why had she said nine o'clock? Was it to insure

that she didn't weaken, didn't go to him? Or was it because she realised that Polly didn't want to be seen and, at nine, Rupert would be busy in the bar?

She stared at the phone. She would have said she'd meet her now. If what Polly told her was something that Michael should hear – it would be too late at nine.

She moved restlessly, and caught sight of herself in the long mirror. Her reflection disgusted her. The yellow cotton dress was creased. Whatever the night held in its waiting hours she must meet them with an outward display of self-respect.

Changed into the periwinkle blue dress, face cleansed and carefully made up, she went down to Howard's room.

He got up from behind a desk and came towards her.

"That's better! That's more like you!"

The admiration in voice and eyes was gratifying. It skimmed the surface but it didn't reach her. There was only one voice she wanted to hear.

He was talking. She caught at the wandering threads of her attention.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I was apologising for that phone call. I've given orders that they're to say you're not here."

"But, Howard –"

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

Michael wouldn't phone. Polly had guessed, Polly had found her. It would have been easy for him to do the same. His silence made it clear that he had accepted her letter, didn't want to contact her.

"I could do with a drink," she said.

He turned to a cabinet. "Of course."

The still quiet in the room got on her nerves. She needed people. Noise to obliterate thought.

"Let's go to the bar."

"I thought –"

She broke in, suddenly impatient. "Stop cosseting me, Howard!" His face fell. She couldn't feel penitence. She couldn't feel anything but the need to escape from his envelop-

ing concern. She was smothered by it. "Let's go," she said, twisting on her heel.

The cocktail bar was small. Crowded. Hazy with smoke. She moved into the parrot-chattering noise and warmth as if into sanctuary.

" 'Evening, Mr. Burke!"

A woman turned from leaning on the bar. A big woman in a dress splashed with outrageous crimson roses. Their eyes met. A flash of recognition passed between them.

"Hallo," the woman grunted.

Miranda muttered a greeting.

"You two know each other?"

"We've – met," the woman said in her gruff voice. "I gave your friend a lift this morning. But I don't know her name."

Howard said: "Miranda. This is Mrs. Nicholls. She's taken a house down here for the summer."

"She thinks I'm crazy," Miranda said brightly.

She saw the look that passed between them and moved up to the bar. Rupert was directly in front of her. Back towards her, he twisted the tap of the upturned whisky bottle. She waited for him to turn. Sparks of excitement seemed to shoot off from the cold core within her. She was aware that Howard had drawn close to the woman. They whispered together.

Rupert moved. Turned. Saw her and stopped short, the glass poised in his hand. His eyes were very bright. There was an air of unnatural gaiety about him. His tongue licked at his lips as he moved and leaned on to the bar between them. She knew that he was remembering the kiss. Her own lips quivered beneath the stare that caressed them openly, blatantly.

"Hallo, baby!"

His eyes moved down her neck. She felt naked.

"You're not surprised to see me!"

"Come for more?" His laugh was loud.

Her flesh crawled as he raised his eyes to hers. Pale blue irises, transparent as glass washed around pupils as small as pin-points. A spasm contracted the muscles of her shoulders.

A man called from the end of the bar: "Boy! Where's my drink?"

"Be right with you." Rupert's eyes clung. "Don't go away, baby!"

His hand came out and stroked soft cobwebs along her bare forearm where it lay on the bar. It was all she could do not to snatch it away.

He moved, sliding the glass along the wood in a gesture of truculent self-confidence. The room fell into place around her. What was she doing here? A glance told her that Howard and the woman had drawn a few paces away. A man came and stood next to her. She peered round his shoulders and saw that their heads were close. Howard was talking.

She turned back. Rupert was coming towards her. There was no denying the magnetism of his dark face. He flashed her a smile. His movements were lithe and sensual. His manner arrogant. There was power in him. His eyes reached for her. She began to tremble. What was the driving-force behind the barrier of the eyes that held her fascinated, uneasy? Was it liquor that filled him with this unnatural gaiety?

He leaned over the bar, close to her. There was no smell of alcohol in the breath that touched her cheek.

"I'm through here at ten." His meaning was clear. "I'm all yours, baby. For an hour."

Her mind alerted. The trembling steadied into a cold, clear conviction that his excitement came from no outward cause. It was the purpose within him. The purpose she must know!

"An hour?" she murmured, leaning even closer. "Is that all?"

His laugh was low and throaty. "I'm in demand, baby!"

"You're meeting Bishop at eleven?"

His eyes narrowed. He said, drawing back: "What makes you think that?"

She tried to retrieve her mistake. Curving her lips in deliberate invitation, holding the flame of excitement hidden, secret, she fluttered her lashes and pouted at him.

"An hour is so short," she murmured and could have laughed aloud at the instant reaction. He was so easy to play with. His response was swift, uncomplicated. His mind, like his body, was that of an animal.

"It's all I can do tonight," he grinned. "Tomorrow –" he gave a sharp laugh "– things'll be different!"

She bit on the questions and said, low and crooning: "Then I'll have to be satisfied with an hour of your company. My room is number eighteen."

The laughter gurgled in his throat. "I know baby! I know!"

The man at her side moved irritably. "If you've finished making an assignation," he said with sarcasm, "I want two lagers, a gin-and-tonic and a dry sherry."

Miranda moved away from the bar. As she came up to Howard and Mrs. Nicholls they stopped talking. Looked at her with veiled thoughts.

"It's all right," she said lightly. "I know you were only trying to explain my crazy behaviour, Howard."

"You're well out of it!"

The woman spoke in short clipped sentences. Her voice was gruff but she conveyed a feeling of strength on which Miranda was tempted to lean.

"Sheridan's a fool! Now don't fly out at me! It's a job for the police. They know how to deal with these swine!"

Miranda became aware that Rupert was standing at the other side of the bar, listening.

"Surely," she said, not turning her head, hoping he understood that she spoke to him. "Surely it's Mr. Sheridan's business. Not ours. It's *his* child. He must protect the boy the way he feels is safest." She stepped backwards. "Can we eat now, Howard?"

"You haven't had a drink."

"I don't need one now."

She lifted her eyes to Rupert. Understanding passed between them, swift and secret. She saw Howard glance from her to the youth, intercepting the look, and turned quickly away. Let him think what he liked! She knew what she was doing and it wasn't as it appeared to be.

The hours that had been so empty were, suddenly, full. She glanced at her watch. She had barely fifty minutes before she must start the five minute walk to the point. An hour after that, primed with the knowledge of what Polly would tell her, she would be with Rupert.

Her thoughts stopped short. This was what Michael had warned her not to do. The prescience of danger was sharp. She saw her room, isolated at the end of the passage. Her stomach twisted on a knot of fear. She *was* crazy! But her madness was impelled by instinct.

Rupert knew something. Rupert had been involved since the beginning. It was reasonable to believe that he would be concerned with the end. She must go through with it. She had to know what he planned to do at eleven. Where he was going. Whom he intended to meet.

She had tried to cut herself off from Michael but she was being drawn back into the net that tightened around him. Polly's fear, Rupert's cocky assurance, both seemed to threaten him. There was nothing to lose by following the flare-path of instinct. If it led her back to Michael, there was all the world to gain.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IT WAS A NIGHT of exquisite beauty. At ten minutes to nine she stood in the garden at Howard's side.

The lawn stretched before her, falling away out of the pool of gold light before the windows into scented darkness. An oak tree was etched against the pale waters of the sea. In its branches it had trapped the moon. It was a night for lovers to lie on the still-warm grass and whisper and kiss and dream.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"No, thank you, Howard. A walk will settle me for sleep." She laughed. "I had so much this afternoon I don't feel I can go to bed yet."

"Don't be too long."

She touched his hand lightly. "I won't."

"I'll be in my room."

"I'll come and report!"

"It's not that I'm worried –"

She broke in. "I know. Thank you, Howard. You've been wonderful."

He grimaced at her. His face was all curves in the lamplight. A round, rosy, cherub. She dropped a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm all right. I won't do anything silly like throwing myself over the cliff!"

"I didn't mean –"

"Didn't you?"

"Well – maybe the thought did cross my mind."

She looked out over the fairyland spread before her.

"It's too beautiful," she murmured, "for tragedy." She moved away. "See you in about half-an-hour."

She forgot him the instant she moved. Across the space her thoughts reached for Michael. Was he walking down the street? Looking at the night? Quivering at its enchantment? Thinking of her? She shook herself and walked faster. He was, probably, already in the public telephone box, filling it with smoke, concentrating on the anticipated ring of the bell, thinking of his son.

Her heels clattered on the rough road. It was dark between the high hedges. Shadows reached for her, setting her nerves on fire. She increased her pace until she was running. Her eyes clung to the open place ahead of her where the road ended in a track that led down the slope of the hill, across the short turf, to the coastguards' hut, gleaming, palely, in the moonlight.

Breathless, she reached open country. She slowed to a walk. Turned her head There was no light yet in the dark tunnel from which she had just emerged. Had Polly changed her mind? She had been frightened on the phone. Was she, now when it came to the point of no return, too scared to come?

Miranda stopped. From where she stood the land fell away on all sides. The glistening sea stretched arms around its curve. Ragged cliffs gleamed white, showing their teeth against the embrace. Slowly, she turned. Somewhere in the cluster of twinkling lights, far across the miles of flat pastures, Michael moved, lived.

She started. Her heart missed a beat. Raced on in frenzied pulsating.

In the centre of the flat lands she saw a red glow. She

blinked. It must be a fantasy. There was nothing there that could flicker and seethe as if a fire burned.

Her eyes stretched wide. Her mind refused their evidence for another, spasmodic heart-beat. Then she was running. Back into the dark tunnel. Unaware of the shadows. Was this what Polly had meant to tell her? Was this why her courage had failed? She remembered the girl's voice calling down the phone. Had she tried to make the time of meeting earlier?

Her heel caught on a stone. She flung out her arms as she stumbled. Cried aloud as she caught herself from falling. Stopped thinking of anything but the need to find her way safely through the darkness. Back to the lights of the hotel.

"But why, Howard? Why?"

They stood on the road. A small knot of people had gathered from cars that were parked along the verge. Their upturned faces were splashed with the ugly red, with taut excitement.

A man, tall and thin as a pole, his voice loud and aggressive, held the centre of the talk.

"Bloody shame!" he swore. "I've been coming here for twenty years. My Dad before me. That tram's been a landmark for nearly half a century!"

"Won't be the same without it!" A small plump woman who wagged her head from side to side.

"Anyone in there?" Another man.

The tall man: "Could be! Place went up in a matter of seconds."

"You saw it!" Miranda pushed her way through the huddled group.

"I did. And, again, I didn't."

"Tell me!" she shouted, her voice rising. She felt the pressure of eyes, peering at her, bodies crowding her in. With an effort, she grabbed at control. "It's *my* tram," she explained. Murmurs were like pin-pricks, sympathy jarred. "Please tell me what you know."

She turned to look at the smouldering ruin. Her eyes smarted from the heat, the smoke, the misery, but she couldn't look away. As they had driven up, the roof of the tram had

fallen in with a shower of sparks and sky-shooting flames. Now there was only a red-hot inferno of massed and blazing wood.

Her hand made a small gesture. Within its arc the man seemed to see her memory of a lost world. Sunlit picnics. Swimming parties, long, slow hours of drowsy happiness. He cleared his throat and spoke more quietly.

"The wife and I were walking along the sea-wall. She spotted it first. 'Looks like a fire,' she said. The inside of the tram was glowing. We began to run. Someone came out of the door."

"You *saw* someone?"

"Yes."

"A man?"

He shook his head. "We were too far. Could've been a man. A young man. Or a girl. The tram seemed to explode into flame. We forgot the person."

"Explode!"

"Yes."

"You think this – person – had put petrol or something . . ." Her voice died.

"That's what it looked like to us," he said gently. "We ran over. There was nothing we could do. I'm sorry." He gave a gruff laugh. "Silly thing to say."

She went straight on, following the train of thought.

"This person – what happened?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"Didn't you try and catch him?"

"We tried. But it's dark in the fields. We couldn't get past between the tram and the fences. Flames were shooting out of the windows."

"I think," the woman spoke for the first time, "Whoever it was saw us coming and ran round the side as the tram burst into flame. I wouldn't be surprised if he – or she – got burned. I think I heard a shout."

Miranda pulled her gaze from the evil glow. The woman's face was creased with concern.

"*You* think it was a girl," she said quietly.

The woman nodded "It could be. It wore trousers and a dark jersey. A cap hid its hair and face. But it moved like a girl.

Howard said: "Will you come to the police station?"

"Of course."

The police! In spite of the heat Miranda shivered. Drained of emotion, she allowed Howard to lead her to the car.

As they moved off, a grey Morris edged out and fell in behind them. She didn't look back. She had no need to. The sight of the burning tram was engraved on her mind. She remembered the doll and a dull pain twisted. She saw its rosy cheeks and innocent eyes melting, flowing into a distorted monstrosity.

Had the fire anything to do with the doll?

She said: "There's something – horrible – crazy. As if this – person – is getting at me."

"Relax, Miranda. Now, at last, the police'll cope."

She didn't even hear. "It's as if there were two things happening at the same time. The kidnapping – which is directed against Michael. The boat and this fire – against me."

"The police," he insisted, "will find the answer."

Again, she ignored him. "Polly said she had something to tell me."

He gave her a sharp look. "Polly!"

"It could be Polly?" It was a question.

"You want to try and find her," he said quietly.

"Before we go to the police."

"Very well. But we'll go to the police immediately afterwards."

She didn't answer. It was as if she knew that it depended on her own efforts. There was no time for the slow, methodical workings of the law.

The lights of the town reached out and swallowed them. Howard pulled up in front of the coffee bar. The Morris stopped behind them. He got out, explained to the man. Miranda was opening the glass door of the café as he came to her side.

The juke-box blazed its eternal music. She stood in the entrance, her eyes raking the crowded room.

"She's not here. Nor Derek."

"Let's try the bowling alley."

The car passed the end of the cobbled road. Miranda

glance up towards the hotel. The road was empty. Had Michael already gone?

The road vanished. They drove along for a hundred yards and turned sharp right. The Morris followed.

Again, she got out as the car stopped. Lights flared across the wide entrance. At Howard's side, she walked in. The dull rumble of the bowls seemed to echo in her heart. It took only a single quick glance to find him. He bent, a bowl in his hand. With a flowing movement he ran forwards, threw. The bowl fled from his hand. He stayed, crouched, watching. With a shout, he sprang straight and swung round as the ninepins scattered, leaving only two standing.

"How's that!"

His eyes met hers. For a moment, he froze. Then, as she moved towards him, he turned away, spoke to a girl at his side. "Set 'em up! Beat that if you can!"

Miranda's pulse quickened. What was the girl's name? Of course!

"Lulu!" she exclaimed.

The girl stared at her, brazen, defiant. "Want me?"

Derek stood at her side. Animosity sparked from them.

"Where's Polly?"

"Polly?"

"You know who I mean!" she flashed. "She was supposed to meet me." Something awoke in the back of the girl's cold grey eyes. "Where is she? Do *you* know Lulu?"

The fear – or was it anger? – was gone. Lulu moved towards the end of the bowling run.

Miranda smarted at the insolent, contemptuous rejection. Her fists clenched as she watched the girl bend and thrust a thumb into the hole in the ball. The trousers were tight around her behind and legs, revealing the plump contours. Her left hand was hidden in her pocket.

Derek asked: "Why does Polly want to see you?"

Miranda started. She had forgotten him. Now, as she turned her head, she found him watching her with a guarded expression.

"That's what *I* want to know! Where *is* she?"

He hesitated. She saw him glance at Lulu and moved closer

to him. "Derek, listen to me. Polly's frightened. If you're fond of her –"

His eyes swept back at her. The moment was gone. A grin broadened his thick lips, mocking her. "Course I'm fond of my sister!"

"Polly's your sister?"

"No one else's!"

She stared at him, not seeing him. There was no certainty in her. "If you *do* see her," she said dully, "tell her I'll be at Burke House."

"I'll do that thing!"

He lounged away. Howard touched her arm.

"Let's go."

Miranda lingered, watching the girl as she took her stance for the throw. Why had she taken so long? Had she been watching them? Now, as if released, she bent forwards. Her body was easy. She didn't turn her head. Her arm swung forward. The ball rolled, spinning noisily, echoing along the wood. It hit the front pin. One by one, they clattered to the ground.

She sprang upright. "Got you, Derek!" she cried, exultant. "You owe me a coffee!"

There was an indefinable atmosphere about her. An air of slyness. Almost of triumph. As if she scarcely controlled an emotion quite out of proportion to her success.

As she came level, Miranda stood in her path.

"I suppose," she said, "you've been here all evening?"

Lulu's laugh was high and trilling. "Where else?" She leaned backwards on her hips. Both hands were hidden in the pockets of the man's trousers. The black silk jersey of her blouse clung to her plump breasts.

Derek took her arm. "Let's get going! I don't fancy the company."

"Nor me!"

For a moment Miranda held her position. Then, as Lulu moved, their bodies touched.

"Do you mind?" Lulu demanded.

Miranda yielded. They walked past, swinging on their hips,

proud of their youth, sensuously confident. She watched them but they didn't turn.

"Come, Miranda," Howard said.

She moved with him, her legs dragging. There was no shred of evidence. A girl could wear trousers and a navy blue jersey without committing the crime of arson!

The night air was warm but a shiver sped over her. This cruel threat of violence that never, quite, struck home, was aimed at herself. Why? Who would wish her ill? Her mind raced along the avenues of the past and found nothing. She could think of no one who would be her enemy.

Certainly not Lulu. A girl she knew only by sight. A girl whose life had never, before the arrival of Michael, come in contact with her own.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SERGEANT was slow and quietly efficient. Miranda fretted beneath his questions. It was important to get away. To find Polly. They were wasting time on these interminable minutes of ponderous question and answer.

She looked up at the round face of the clock. Five minutes past ten. How long would Polly wait?

And Rupert?

In the confusion she had forgotten Rupert. But *he* would wait. Until eleven.

At last, it was over. The Sergeant closed his book. Murmured words of sympathy. At last, she was outside. She drew in a deep breath.

Automatically, she thanked the stranger and his wife and sank into the car. Howard followed.

On the return journey, they didn't speak. For a moment she longed to ask him to turn up the cobbled hill. She bit her lip. Michael wouldn't be there. Not so late. Maybe, already, he had paid the money. Recovered his son.

The moon had risen and transformed the world to silver. Silver sea. Silver fields. Silver trees. The words of a child-

hood song ran through her head. But, tonight, there were no silver mice! Only the tram, burning with a sultry glow. Defying the magical fairyland. Consuming itself in a glowering, evil hell.

It was ten-thirty when the car turned in at the gates of the hotel.

"A drink," he said. "We both need one."

"I've got to go to the coastguard's hut." She knew it was a hopeless action, but she had to go.

"Polly?" His voice sharpened.

"Yes."

"I'll come with you."

She was too miserable to argue. A part of her was even glad of his company. They walked quickly along the road and, because he was with her, the thick black shadow beneath the hedge held no terrors.

The silver turf was springy. It was like walking on a carpet of mercury. The coastguard's hut was a child's doll's house, white and sturdy and square, its window a sheet of reflected silver light.

She had known that Polly would be gone, that it would be a fruitless walk. Even so, the disappointment was sharp as she turned back. She had been a fool to waste time coming here! Her pace quickened. Maybe it had cost her the chance of a talk with Rupert!

Howard strode at her side. She was scarcely aware of him. Her mind raced ahead of her, willing Rupert to be in her room.

The hotel was quiet. The bar darkened. A few people drank coffee in the lounge but it was already settling into sleep. She glanced at her watch. Five minutes to eleven!

She said quickly: "I won't have a drink, if you don't mind. I'm awfully tired."

"Of course! Go to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

She looked into his face. What she saw made her reach forward and drop a light kiss on his cheek.

"Don't worry about me."

"Can't help it." His smile was brief. "You seem to have a knack of getting into trouble."

"I certainly do!" She managed a tremulous laugh.

"Trouble's my middle name! But I'm used to it!" Her voice dropped. "Sorry if the cheery note is overdone. I really am grateful to you."

"I *like* trouble! It's meat and drink to me." He gave her a gentle push. "Good night!"

"Good night, Howard."

She walked quickly up the stairs. It was three minutes to eleven. She ran along the passage. Down the short flight. Swung right. Along, past the empty bathroom. To her own door.

She flung it open. The room was full of shadows. The small window was an oblong of light. Across the floor the moon flung a bar of silver. She couldn't see beyond it.

She couldn't move. The disappointment was acute. Her nostrils twitched. The room smelled of smoke. *Was* he still here? In the dark? Her flesh crawled. There was someone in the room. She felt the unseen, silent presence, watching her. Waiting. It seemed as if she had stood here for an age but she knew it could only be a moment.

"Rupert?"

Her voice echoed thinly, reaching for him. Something moved in the shadows beyond the slanting barrier of moonlight. A man's legs and half a body stepped into the light. His face was hidden in the darkness above.

Her heart raced. Exerting her will she reached for the switch. Light filled the room. The breath stopped in her lungs. It was a trick. A figment of her imagination.

"You . . ." she whispered.

The figure moved towards her. "I apologise. I didn't know you were expecting someone."

If she had been in any doubt she knew, now, that she loved him unbearably. She knew, too, with a chilling certainty, that she didn't know him at all. Suddenly, it didn't matter. As he came closer, his eyes on her face, steady in spite of his words, she knew, without a flicker of doubt, that he was one of the rare few. A man to be trusted.

Everything fell away. It was as if she shed a lead-weighted cloak. Polly, Rupert, Lulu – the fire, the doll, the terror – all were gone. She took a step towards him.

He said, moving past her: "I'll go."

"Michael –" She swung round towards him.

He stopped in the doorway. "Yes?"

Steadily, quietly, she said: "I love you, Michael." A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Don't let it embarrass you. You needn't say anything. It's just – seeing you again – here – when I thought you were miles away. . . ." He was so still, his face so empty of expression, she turned away. "Why *are* you here?" she asked, too-bright, too-loud.

"You know why."

Without turning, she asked: "Didn't Bishop phone?"

"It's nothing to do with Bishop."

Her heart missed a beat. She twisted her fingers together and couldn't speak. Behind her, his voice reached for her.

"Why did you run away?"

"I had to."

"I don't get it. If you mean what you've just said –"

"I do! I do!"

"Then *why*?" She didn't answer. "Your letter didn't make sense."

She swung on him, her eyes filling with tears "It couldn't!" she cried.

"Was it something Bishop said to you?"

She nodded, veiling her eyes, feeling the tears run cold down her cheeks.

"What did he say?"

The questions shot at her in rapid succession. She was tired and uncertain. Her own question nagged. Had he seen Rupert? Here? In her room? Was that the reason for his chill formality? For his waiting in the dark?

She broke out in sudden exasperation: "Is this an inquisition?"

"Of course not."

"I don't have to account to you for my actions."

He looked at her for a long moment. "No," he agreed. "You don't. But it would help me if you do."

She flung back her head. "All right! I'll tell you." She was half-defiant, half-confused. "Bishop told me that if I stayed with you – he'd use me to force your hand."

"He threatened you?"

"Do you think I cared about *that*?"

"Then what *did* you care about? So much that you walked out on me?"

"He said you'd have to choose between Boy and me. I made the choice for you."

He was silent. She knew that they had arrived at the moment of supreme importance. His answer would contain the future. She couldn't look at him. She stared at the carpet, its pattern wavering in the wash of tears.

"There's no choice," he said quietly. "I told you – or I *thought* I told you –" He stopped. Moved into the room and shut the door. "Mrs. O'Keefe had gone," he said.

She looked up, startled by the sudden change. He was moving to the window. He stood, looking out. He flicked his stub end through the open space. It arched a second, glowing, before it fell from sight. He lit another one before he spoke again.

"When I got back to the hotel and found your letter I think I went mad. I spent the whole of the day, racing round in the car. I went to the tram. I went to the estuary. I got your home address from Dobson and went there. The 'For Sale' board stopped me in my tracks."

The board was up already! It didn't touch her. It belonged to another life.

"There was nothing more I could do. You'd gone." He paused, drawing on the cigarette, sending the smoke in a sharp swirl out of his nostrils. "When I got back a girl was waiting. She asked me where you were. That steadied me. I stopped tearing about and began to think. To ask. The porter told me you'd gone with Burke. Told me about this hotel. I had to be there for Bishop's phone call. The bastard kept me waiting! Twenty minutes! It wasn't only that damned box that made me sweat!" His voice steadied. "I saw the fire. On the way here."

She found her voice. "The tram?"

"How on earth did it happen?"

"I don't know. You didn't see me there?"

"It was *you* I was looking for! I didn't stop. It took me a

little time to find this place. As I drove in I saw that girl again. Getting off a bicycle."

"Polly!" The name sprang out of her, a greyhound out of a trap when it sees the hare. "Did she come in here?"

He nodded, without turning.

"What time was that?"

"It must've been nearly ten. I followed her in but she had done a vanishing trick. I asked for you but they said you were out. I needed a drink. It was a shock to find our mutual friend behind the bar! As I had to know the number of your room I bought him a beer. He was very chatty. Eager to give me the information! More! He volunteered that you'd not be back till eleven."

"He did!"

At last he moved Slowly, his big body swung round. His eyes held hers. He seemed to fill the small room with his presence.

"I gather," he said softly, "that it was a blind."

She drew herself up. The tears were drying, forgotten, on her cheeks.

"I arranged to meet him."

His eyes scanned the room, came to rest on the bed. Colour flamed in her cheeks.

"It's not what you're thinking!"

"Don't you think it's time you stopped being so cocky about what *I* think?" A faint smile lightened the tension in his face.

"I guess it is!" She heard her own laugh with surprise.

"Then *I'll* tell *you*!" You believe he knows something about tonight." She nodded. "You were prepared to get him up here and play at Mata Hari to get his secret from him." Again she nodded. "You're a silly girl! The most step-in-where-angels-etc., that I've ever met!"

He paused. Still, she waited. In the silence the swirl of the sea flowed in through the open window. Somewhere a dog barked. Somewhere, close at hand, there was a faint sound. Miranda's ears strained. What was it? The soft rustling? Where? She listened. It seemed to come from the region of the wardrobe. Small, delicate tappings. Or was it scratchings? A mouse?

"Will you marry me?"

She stood motionless. The words echoed in her head. For the space of a heart-beat she couldn't believe that she had heard them. Then they swept through her.

"Try and stop me!" she cried, half laughing, half in a sob.

"Fine! Now we can get on with the job!"

She shook her head at him in a small gesture of tender mockery.

"Not even *one* kiss?"

His smile was intimate. "Do you think I could stop at one?"

"I'm not thinking what you think – remember?"

The smile faded. She trembled at the wonderful hunger in his eyes.

"Well, I couldn't!" His voice was taut. "Time's getting on. We've to be in Hastings at midnight."

The trembling stopped. In the miracle of her own happiness she had forgotten.

"He's in Hastings?"

"Yes. A house on the hill –"

She broke in excitedly. "Above the funicular?"

"How the devil do you know?"

"It's crazy! I saw him! At the window. When I was following Bishop in the car."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I *know*? It was only a glimpse. I thought I was imagining it. I had to follow Bishop."

"Of course," he said gently, "you couldn't know." He moved towards her. "It's time to go."

"I'll get a coat."

His laugh was sweet to hear. "Are you cold? Tonight?"

"I warn you," she giggled. "I have a hot-water bottle when I'm in Spain!"

"I don't believe you!"

"Calling me a liar?"

It was a delicious sensation, the taste of fine wine, the scent of roses, the intimacy of teasing. In a swift moment of understanding, as she moved, as she relished the subtlety of their closeness, she realised that this was something she had never known. Bill had been a serious man. The art of laughter had

never appeared in his love-making. He had always kept a part of himself to himself. As if there was something he couldn't, or wouldn't share with her. It wouldn't be like that with Michael. Already, she was nearer to him than she had ever been to Bill.

Her hand touched the metal knob of the wardrobe. A part of her heard, again, the scrabblings. Most of her existed within the caress of his eyes. Words raced through her. She tried to grab at them but they eluded her grasp. She could only stand, looking at him, smiling a smile of foolish, utter happiness.

"I know," he said quietly.

"But you don't!"

"I may not understand *women* – but I love *you*. Wait. Just a little longer. I'll show you –"

She didn't want to look away from his eyes. Without turning her head her fingers twisted the knob. The door flew open. His face changed. Something fell against her legs. She gave a smothered cry. As she sprang away, something flopped to the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MIRANDA STARED, paralysed with shock. Her mouth opened. She thought she shouted but the sound was no more than a baby's whimper in the darkness.

"Polly!"

Michael was across the room, on his knees. The girl lay on her side. Her ankles were bound by a length of clothes-line. It wound round her legs, pressing them up against her chest. Her wrists and arms were strapped behind her. Above the white gag her eyes were huge with terror.

He struggled with the knot. After an interminable time it came free. With a quick gesture he flung the handkerchief across the room. The girl drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"You're all right," Michael said, firm and gentle as if he soothed a child from a nightmare.

"I tried to make you hear. . . ." The words came out in dry, choking gasps.

So that was the noise she had heard! Polly's fingers, scratching on the floor of the wardrobe. Miranda felt sick.

"Don't try and talk," Michael said. "I'll have you free in a minute." And to Miranda: "I've some brandy in the car. A flask in the front cubbyhole."

Miranda ran. It was a relief to get out of the room. Away from the sight of the girl's white-faced terror. The hotel was silent. She felt unreal, a ghost in the sleeping building. Was it possible that one could sleep, quietly, at peace?

The beauty of the night was like a slap in the face. A douse of cold water. Her thoughts steadied as she opened the door of her car. Why hadn't she seen it before? Even if it was hidden in the shadow of the trees, surely she should have noticed it? But she hadn't expected to see it. Her mind had been concentrated on a narrow channel. Her fingers tightened on the silver and glass flask.

Rupert!

He must have found Polly when he went to her room. He must have had the clothes-line with him. She began to tremble violently, out of control. It was chance that he had discovered Polly waiting. It wasn't chance that he had tied her up. It was chance that had set Polly free. If she, Miranda, hadn't wanted a coat, the girl could have lain there all night. Faint with terror. Slowly suffocating. The brutality, the utter disregard of the girl's suffering, frightened her more than the deed.

It could have been herself!

If Rupert had found her in that room, isolated from help, at the end of the passage, it would have been *she* who had lain there. Trussed. Helpless. Until Howard missed her. At what time in the morning? It would have been she, Miranda, who lay in the black, airless wardrobe. Now. At this moment. She seemed to feel the bite of the cords. The thick wad of the handkerchief wrapped across her mouth. The panic screaming that couldn't be heard. The slow numbing of the limbs. The difficulty of getting enough breath.

She twisted on her heel and the sensation vanished. Anger began to coil within her. Like a spring, it tightened in upon

itself, coil upon coil, until her body stopped trembling and she was all a taut knot of determination.

Her steps were as light as a short-distance sprinter. Every muscle, every nerve was pitched to a high-key, a vivid control. Her mind was like a diamond, hard and clear and brilliant.

She came quietly into the room. Michael had lifted Polly on to the bed and was massaging her legs. Her head twisted on the pillow. Her teeth gleamed, her lower lip was bloodless where she bit against the moans.

"Let it go!" Michael said. "Shout blue murder if you want to!"

Polly gave him a distorted smile. "And wake the hotel?"

"If it helps – wake 'em all!" He turned his head as his hands rubbed life into the outstretched limbs. "Give her a good strong drink."

Miranda unscrewed the flask as she went to the bed. Sliding sideways she sat and raised the girl's head until it rested against her shoulder. Polly tried to move an arm but cried aloud with the pain.

"Don't try and help," Miranda said, holding the flask to the girl's raw lips. "Take it gently."

Polly drank. Gasped and spluttered.

"More! That's a good girl!"

The head turned, pressing against her bare neck. Miranda's arm tightened as she looked across at Michael. She had seen him angry before, but the cold fury in his eyes sent a shiver down her back. This time, she knew, she read his thoughts. He was angry for the girl. The ice-cold violence was for herself. He, too, had realised that Polly had been on the receiving end of what had been intended for her, Miranda.

The silence was a hollow, waiting to be filled. The distant crash of waves against the cliffs was a warning.

There were things she must know. Gently, she laid the girl back on the pillow and stood up.

"Polly," she began. "I know how you feel but I have to talk to you. We haven't much time."

The enormous, fear-dark eyes stared up at her. The girl's effort at a smile was deeply moving.

"I know, Mrs. Miller. That's why I'm here."

"Then you know about tonight?"

A frown creased her brows. "Tonight?"

Miranda shook her head lightly. "Don't worry. Just tell me what you came here to say."

Polly struggled up against the bedhead. Michael moved to Miranda's side as she whispered, looking from one to the other with troubled eyes: "I – I don't know where to begin."

"Don't be afraid," Michael encouraged her. "We're your friends. You can trust us."

A faint flush came up in the colourless cheeks.

"I should've told you, Mrs. Miller. It was the shock, seeing that doll in your arms."

"I was right!" Miranda cried. "It *was* you who cut the hair."

The girl nodded.

"Why?"

"It was Derek."

"Derek?" It was a surprise. A shock.

"He said he wantd it for our young cousin. She doesn't like girl-dolls. I'm making trousers and jacket for it, too."

The reasonableness of it was confusing. Miranda flung an uncertain look at the man at her side.

"Do you know what it was used for?" he asked softly.

"Used for? I don't get it." Polly's voice sharpened.

He told her. She had been frightened before but now it seemed as if fear came out of her in tangible waves. She was up off the bed in a single, swinging movement. It was only a few steps to the door but Michael was round the end of the bed and across the room before she could open it. She jerked away from him. With her back to the wall she flung words at him in a high, cracked voice.

"Derek didn't have nothing to do with it! He's not like that. He's a bit mad, but he's not bad."

Michael tried to stop the flood of words but she ignored him.

"He wouldn't do a thing like that! He's got a good job. In my uncle's garage. In September he's going to be trained at Rootes in Coventry. One day, the garage will be his. My uncle's promised."

Michael took out his case and held it towards her.

"Have a cigarette, Polly."

She took a step forwards and caught his arm.

"You must believe me!"

"I'd like to, Polly. I'd like to."

Slowly, the defiance drained out of her. She released her grip and selected a cigarette.

"I don't get it," she repeated dully.

As he held the lighter he talked to her. "I'm quite prepared to accept your faith in your boy friend –"

"Derek's my brother!"

He gave a sharp look. "Your brother!" His smile was warm. "In that case – maybe you're right about him."

"I am! I am!"

"But if it wasn't Derek – who was it?"

Her eyes flashed. Her head tossed. The whole of her was an exclamation mark of hatred.

"It was Rupert, of course!"

"Why 'of course'?"

"He's on the drug."

"You mean," Michael said softly, "he's a drug-addict."

"Reefers!"

"But not Derek?"

"He's got more sense!" Contempt curled the bitten lips. "Rupert'll do *anything* for kicks! He'll do a ton on corners, on the white line! Needs his head examined!"

"And the fire?"

Fear sparked again. Her voice was sullen: "I know nothing about that!"

"Come now," Michael snapped. "Derek was obviously connected with the doll. You must know something about it!"

"The first I knew was when I saw it from the point." Her head tossed backwards, voice and eyes carried conviction.

"Do you think it was Rupert's doing?" Michael persisted helplessly.

She shook her head. "Don't see that it could've been him. He was here, wasn't he?"

"And if he was" – his voice sharpened – "where was Derek?"

She stared at him. Slowly, the colour flamed. Her head dropped. She slumped in upon herself.

"I – I don't know."

Silence. No one moved. They were caught in the impasse. The uncertainty.

Suddenly, Michael took a step towards her. Her head flew up and she shrank away from him.

"Don't be frightened of me," he said gently. "Come." He put an arm round her shoulder, drawing her close. "You've been through a terrible experience. Now, you must learn to forget it." He was leading her across the room. "Lie down and rest. We've got to go out –"

He drew back the eiderdown with his free hand and eased her on to the bed. He lifted her legs and pulled the eiderdown over her. As he moved away, she caught his hand. For a moment she stared up at him, her lips parted as if words trembled on the blood-stained, broken flesh.

"Yes?" he prompted. "What is it?"

"I –I'm afraid to be alone," she faltered.

Miranda shivered. Had this been what Polly had seemed about to say? Instinct defied reason. She knew it was not. She looked at her watch. It was seventeen minutes to twelve. There was no more time.

She said: "I'll tell Mrs. Wilson to come and keep you company."

She was already at the open door of the wardrobe. She pulled a white dustcoat off its hanger, shut the door, and thrust her arms through the sleeves. She turned at Michael's helping hand and smiled up at him. His face was grave.

"You can take that off," he said.

"I told you I need it."

"You're not coming."

"Not coming?" She stared at him, shocked and incredulous.

"No."

Her shoulders stiffened. "I am," she said.

"Miranda. . . ." There was power in his voice. "I mean it. I should have waited until it was all over before I came to you. I'm *not* taking you with me."

She braced herself to withstand the strength of him. "You're

right about one thing. You're not taking me. I'm coming of my own free will."

He persisted, his jaw set in obstinate determination. "It may be dangerous! I won't let you run any more risks."

In spite of herself, she shivered. "Dangerous for me?" she tried to laugh but it came out in a strangled rush of air.

"For *you*."

"No." She shook her head. "I think they've finished with me. Burning the tram was like putting an end to something." She brushed a hand across her forehead. "I can't explain it – I just *feel* it!"

"You can feel what you like!" He was angry in his fear, "You're not coming!"

She looked into his face without wavering.

"How are you going to stop me?"

His will pressed against hers. She felt the authority of it. He was a man who was accustomed to having his own way. He was also a man whose need of her weakened the ultimate power of him.

He said abruptly, changing his tone, pleading with her: "You know I can't stop you."

"Not unless you use that!" She pointed at the coil of rope at their feet."

"Not if I ask you? Not if I say 'Please don't come'?"

She knew that she had won. For a moment she hesitated. Was her insistence false? Was she acting out of love for him? Or out of the selfish need to be with him? The questions resolved themselves.

"If I could," she said slowly, softly. "I would. Don't you see – I *have* to be with you in this." She dropped her voice even lower. "Boy's your son. I *must* be there."

He relaxed. His shoulders lifted in a light shrug of acceptance. He turned, without speaking, and went to the door.

Miranda followed, turning to smile at the girl whose face was as white as the pillow on which it lay.

She made a last effort. "You haven't anything else to tell us, Polly?"

The head moved from side to side. The eyes closed, rejecting her. Miranda went in front of Michael, out of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A CHURCH CLOCK boomed midnight as they entered the outskirts of the town. The first note rolled ominously, thundering away across the rooftops to a fading echo. The street was empty. The houses darkened except for an occasional glow behind the curtains of an upper window.

The car nosed round a corner. It was a shock to see one house, brilliantly alight. Before she accelerated, a blaze of music filled the car. She turned her head. Michael's profile was sharp against the light. Through the open windows she glimpsed couples dancing.

"Do you like to dance?" It was the first thing he had said since they got into the car.

She looked back at the road. "Love it! Do you?"

"I'm the finest Charleston expert in the country!"

In spite of the tension, the trickles of excitement and fear sparking up and down her spine, she felt a moment of freedom. It was gone with the house.

"Do you think this is really the end?" she asked.

"It's got to be." He paused. "One way or another."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm at the end of my tether. If Bishop tries any more tricks – I'll go to the police."

"I think you're right." Her words sounded feeble. A small speck of dust thrown in the face of the enemy. But there was nothing more to say.

She was driving along the low road. The funicular, silent and motionless, rose against the cliffs. At top and bottom, between the strips of moonlit rails, the carriages crouched like sleeping beasts.

The drum of the engine was a violation of the hushed and sleeping town as she changed down and pressed her foot on to the accelerator to mount the hill.

The house rose up above the horizon. It reared against the sky. Moonlight washed its solid, square, white walls. It was in

darkness. Except for a single curtained, rosy window on the ground floor. The one at which she had seen the face of the child. Her stomach tightened in a convulsive contraction.

"They're up," she said in a voice that didn't sound familiar.

"I dare say they're expecting us!" His laugh was grim.

A thought leaped into her mind like a fish out of a pool. "You've got the ransom money?"

He nodded. "I locked it in the boot. Seemed safer than carrying a suitcase around."

And another thought, leaping chill and sinister.

"The – gun?"

"Of course." He hesitated. Then he said gently: "Don't worry. It's only for show. It's not loaded."

The relief made her light-headed. "Good job Bishop doesn't know!" she giggled.

"Are you a good actress?"

She flung him a puzzled look. "I don't know."

"You'll have to be – if I need to use it."

The laughter died. The gun might not be loaded but the premonition of danger was increased by his words. She braked as the gates opened in the wall. Her fingers tightened on the wheel. The drive rose steeply, a grey path leading to the side of the house.

"If I have to be," she tried to keep her voice easy. "If it comes to that – I'll out-act Flora Robson!"

The car swept up the drive. Swung round. Stopped. She doused lights and engine. Silence possessed them. They sat motionless, looking with unseeing eyes. The ground fell away from them, down to the sea. Everything was still. Hushed. The waters rippled softly along the path of the moon. The waves whispered against the sand. She drew in a sharp breath, loud in the silence.

"If it comes to that –" His voice was tense, brittle as breaking glass. "Stay close to me."

In the moonlight the children's playground was ghostly. A swing creaked. She was chilled by a feeling of fantasy. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be herself, sitting in her car beside a man with a revolver. An unloaded one!

She said, on a low half-laugh: "Pinch me, Michael!"

She felt him turn and look at her but she stared ahead, at the upright bar of the see-saw.

"You can still go back," he said.

Her eyes swung round to his. "We've been through all that!" In the shadow of the car his face was insubstantial. "It's just that I don't feel –" She shook her head in a quick gesture of helplessness. "It seems so impossible."

His hand reached for hers. He didn't speak. Just held it in a firm grip that told her more than words.

She straightened her back and returned the unspoken reassurance.

"Sitting here won't get us anywhere!" She had a sudden hysterical longing to laugh. To shout. To make any loud noise that would break the silence and the tension. She glanced sideways at the front door. It was set in the shade of a deep porch. "They must've heard us," she said. "Why don't they open up?"

Her head swung back on the pull of his voice.

"I mean it," he said. "Stay close to me."

Cold water ran down her spine but she smiled at him. "If you think I'll move an inch away from you," she said on a light, breathless laugh, "you're crazy!"

"The whole world's mad." He gave her a wry smile as he released her hand. "Except thee and me! And even thee's a bit touched!" He opened his door. "Let's go and finish this whole crazy episode!"

She was out in the open. It was as if she had left a haven. Sitting at his side, talking nonsense, she had been able to cling to a faint comfort. Now, it was gone. She stood, looking up at the house. Up here on the hill, a faint wind blew. It caressed her cheek with warm fingers but she shivered as if it was the wind of winter. He came round the front of the car and stood at her side.

"Aren't you going to get the money?"

He shook his head. "I'll leave it where it is until I see how the land lies."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"You've got the key."

"Here. . . ."

She opened her hand and held it out. The key looked small and bright.

"I'll take it." His finger and thumb brushed her palm. "I don't want you to have anything. . . ."

The unfinished sentence held disquiet. His eyes were steady on hers. He towered over her, big and strong, but she was afraid for him. His shoulders straightened.

"Right!" he grunted. "Here goes!"

He strode across the short open space. Mounted the steps. Went into the shadow of the porch. In her turn, she braced her shoulders. Hurried after him. His hand went out. A small circle of light revealed the bell. It vanished beneath his fingers. Distantly she heard the faint ringing.

They waited. Her heart thumped loudly. She pressed an arm against its betrayal. Panic seized her. She had wanted to shout, now she longed to run. The urge was so strong, so obsessive, she had to hold on to the porch to keep her legs from the humiliation of cowardice.

The sound of the knocker, crashing on the door, jerked her back into control.

"What's he playing at!" she cried, exasperated. "He must be here."

"He's here!" Michael said grimly. "Having his last bit of fun at our expense!"

"Fun!"

The word caught, hung on her lips. The door was opening slowly, silently. No one appeared. The hall swung into view. It was in darkness. Light flowed out of an open door on the left.

"Bishop enjoys a dramatic effect!" Michael gave a short, barking laugh. He put out a hand and thrust it against the now-motionless front door. "Come out!" he cried in loud over-emphasis. "Let's see you, Bishop!"

Slowly a figure moved round the back-thrust angle of the door. Miranda gasped.

"Mrs. O'Keefe!"

The woman stood in front of them, a black outline against the stream of light. Her face was a pale oval out of which the voice issued, pale and emotionless.

"Good evening, Mr. Sheridan."

"Of course!" he snapped. "You had to be here!" He took a step towards her. "Where's my son?"

"Mr. Bishop says will you go into the sitting-room."

Miranda caught her lip between her teeth.

Before either of them could speak, Mrs. O'Keefe turned. She glided away from them, moving through the light and dissolving into the shadows beyond.

Michael said, with an attempt at a laugh: "Quite a welcome!"

"I'm like Polly." Miranda shook her head. "I don't get it."

"We will!"

He moved and shut the door. Instantly the house drew close around them. The night, the world outside, were gone. There was nothing but this darkened hall. And the beckoning light from the inner doorway. And silence. Absolute. Complete. So thick it was a solid block against the ears.

A movement caught her eye. She looked at Michael. He put his hand into his pocket. She knew, as if she could see through the material, that his fingers tightened on the gun.

"We've had our instructions." He spoke in a low voice but it was loud in the unnatural hush. "Let's obey them." He gave her a quick look. "I'll go first."

A spasm twisted her muscles as he moved. Walking stiffly, as if the floor were a sheet of ice, she followed. In the doorway she paused, her eyes raking the room.

There were no shadows here. Candle-bulbs in crimson shades clung to the white walls. A small chandelier glistened. Crimson curtains were great splashes of colour. Apple green furniture was scattered on the wall-to-wall slate-coloured carpet. Great bowls of red roses stood on occasional tables. The air was heavy with their heady perfume. In the centre of the room a small table was set with crystal glasses and decanters.

It was a quiet room. A beautiful room. Violence was so out of place as to seem incredible.

It was the naturalness that unnerved her. She had braced herself for the sight of Bishop, cruel in his triumph. The empty, rose-filled room was a disqueting reaction.

She said breathlessly: "This is mad! He's behaving as if we've come to a cocktail party."

Michael walked to the table. "As our host is late – what'll you have?"

"You're not going to drink?"

"Why not?" He threw her a smile. "This is known as the technique of suspense. Don't let us give him the pleasure of knowing he's succeeding."

Her lips trembled as she took a step into the room.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"You're doing fine! I'm proud of you!"

His eyes left hers, leaped beyond her. His face was a mask of granite.

Miranda swung round. There had been no sound, no footsteps, no faintest creak of a board, but he was in the room. Behind her. So close she could reach out and touch him. In the white light his hair was like burnished copper. His eyes, pinpoints of brilliant antagonism, pierced her like an electric shock.

"I'm afraid I startled you."

"You meant to!" she flashed.

He shook his head at her, the smile cold. "The boot's on the other foot." His voice was as cool and sharp as dropping hail. "*You* startled *me*. I must admit – I didn't expect to see *you*. Not after our last talk. Didn't you tell him?"

Michael said, quiet and emotionless: "She told me."

Without looking away from her, Bishop asked: "Then why is she here?"

"That's *my* business."

"Mine too." Bishop gave an exaggerated sigh. "Won't you ever learn?"

"I'm as stubborn as you."

"Pity! It's a mistake when I hold the trump suit."

"But not the ace."

Bishop stiffened, but still he stood, looking down at Miranda with unblinking eyes.

"I suppose," he said lightly, "you mean the police."

"I mean – the police."

There was no flicker of fear in Bishop's face. Coolly, calmly, he turned and walked to the table.

"That's no ace!" he laughed, lifting the decanter and removing the stopper. "I know you too well. You haven't brought the police with you."

"You don't know me at all, Bishop. You only know what Elizabeth tells you. It's quite a while since she was with me."

A shadow dulled the brilliance in Bishop's eyes. It was gone instantly. His voice was light as he said: "Your drink is whisky on the rocks. In that box at your side you'll find Players, cork-tipped. Being a sentimental man, the room is filled for you with Ena Harkness roses."

"Yours, I imagine, are ginger-ale and pansies."

Bishop flushed at the deliberate insult. The colour drained away as Michael added: "And, no doubt, going by the company you keep, you smoke heroin."

For a moment, Bishop didn't answer. Then, head flung back, he filled the room with peal upon peal of laughter.

Miranda saw the muscle in Michael's jaw tighten. She wanted to speak. To say something that would break the sensation of unreality. But she knew that she must keep silent. This was between the two of them.

Michael moved close to the man. His big body was full of power beside the slender figure in its copper-coloured shirt and olive green Daks. Their eyes met. The laughter was cut off. Tension locked between them. Until this moment each man had fought a shadow. Now, face to face, they saw. Measured each other. Tested the strength of each other. The decanter hung, forgotten, from Bishop's right hand. Michael's hands hung, loosely, at his side.

"I've come for my son," he said.

"And the money?"

"I've got it."

"I don't see it."

"I don't see my son."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BISHOP'S EYES dropped. He discovered the decanter in his hand and began to pour the drink. The gurgle of the liquid was full of an evil hesitation.

"This is a moment," he said quietly, "that has worried me. In an ordinary affair of this kind it's comparatively easy. The money is left in an old oak tree and the boy is set free in another part of the forest."

Michael stiffened but he said nothing. The veins stood out on his forehead, thick and knotted, visible evidence of his struggle for control.

"I'm in a difficult position," Bishop went on in the voice that was so quiet, so cool, so terrible in its control. If you hadn't tried to trick me the first time –"

"Damn you, Bishop!" Michael cried. "I've got the money! Where *is* he?"

"If you hadn't brought that girl with you," Bishop rebuked, "you and I could have faced the problem together."

As he spoke, he filled the third glass and put the decanter back on the table. Michael's hand seemed to move by itself. It sprang out and caught the man by the arm, swung him round and held him close.

"Tell me! Or, by God, I'll make you!"

Bishop looked straight into his face. There was no sign of fear as he mocked: "How will you do that thing?"

"If you don't produce him" – Michael bit at the words between clenched teeth – "I'll go and find him."

"*That* would be difficult for *you*."

They stared at each other, faces close together. In the silence the sound of a car, racing up the hill, brought the world back into focus. It was Michael who broke. His hand dropped. He turned away and moved, heavily, blindly, across the room. He stood with bowed shoulders, his fists clenching and unclenching.

Miranda tok a step towards him. Stopped. Since they had

come into the room it was as if a telepathic communication had sprung up between them. She knew, now, that it needed only one false move on her part to break the slender thread of his control. Michael was strong, but Bishop was younger, wiry. She must do nothing, say nothing, that might provoke a fight between the two of them.

With an effort she turned to Bishop. He waited, completely at ease. His glass lifted to his lips in salutation. In spite of herself, she heard herself cry: "He isn't here!"

"Maybe he is – maybe he isn't."

"I could kill you for this!" There was no passion in Michael's voice, only a cold truth, more terrible than emotion.

"That," Bishop said softly, "would no doubt relieve your feelings. But it wouldn't solve our problem. Have a drink."

Michael swallowed convulsively. His eyes were like burning coals.

"If you don't stop this act of host and guest," he said in the cold, emotionless voice, "I'll tear you apart –"

Miranda moved, groping for a chair. Her legs were like water. Her mind was like cotton-wool.

She looked at the two men as words flung back and forth between them. Michael was near breaking-point. The strain, the build-up of hope, this nonsensical last-minute hiatus were all clear in his drawn face and taut movements.

Bishop's calm was a violent contrast. Not for him the floundering in sudden outbursts of furious despair. Nor the outrageous emptiness of threats he couldn't complete.

As if he felt her concentration, he turned and looked at her. His eyes were blank. He smiled but it was without humour. Quickly, as if he feared she might read his thoughts, he turned away. She had an unreasoning conviction that the act was not for them. She shook her head and rejected the impossible idea. There was no one here but Michael and herself. Her imagination played tricks again! She twisted her hands together and shivered as a draught through the curtains behind her crept round her shoulders.

She was, suddenly, alert. A faint tinkle of glass came from the crystal chandelier. She looked up. The door was opening. She looked, quickly, for Michael. His back was towards her.

He stood by the fireplace, his hands resting on the mantelpiece, his head bowed. She wanted to warn him but something kept her silent.

Bishop, too, had his back to the door. He stood beside the table. There was a moment's silence, a pause in the core of the hurricane that spun them in fruitless circles.

Was this what he had been waiting for?

Her eyes swept back to the door swinging slowly, silently, on its hinges. The blood froze in her veins.

In the flesh, Elizabeth was exactly what the photograph had promised. She stood, her hand on the knob, looking across the room. Wide-eyed, soft-mouthed, petite and delicate of limb, there was an air of confusion about her that woke Miranda's unwilling sympathy.

During the moment while the two women looked at each other, before the men knew of her entrance, it was as if a bond came alive between them. It was Miranda, now, who was confused. With expert eyes she assessed the other's dress. It was simple with the simplicity of expense. Round her neck she wore a gold chain with a heart-shaped emerald and diamond pendant. On her finger she wore a large, square-cut emerald. Every line of her from her exquisitely moulded hair-do to the grey kid shoes spoke of luxury.

Miranda hardened her heart. This was a woman who could join in a conspiracy to kidnap her own child. Could use him as a pawn in a fight with the man who had once been her husband. However sweet a picture she might choose to present, she was a woman whose heart was like that of Midas, as hard and unyielding as the pendant around her neck.

"Michael–" Miranda called in quiet warning.

He turned towards her. She inclined her head and felt a sudden, unexpected pang of jealousy as his eyes met Elizabeth's. Without looking away from his face, searching it for reassurance, she knew that Bishop, too, swung round.

In stunned silence, a timeless pause, the four of them were like statues, their faces frozen into grotesque masks.

It was Michael who spoke, echoing her own thought. "So this is what we've been waiting for."

His voice was cold, his eyes hard. Miranda's jealousy died.

Elizabeth said: "Hallo, Michael," in a tone of strained impersonality.

As Michael turned away Bishop moved quickly across the room. He spoke softly, but there was venom in the words.

"I told you to stay with Father."

Her eyes came up to his, soft as silk. "I know, darling!"

"Then why are you here?"

"You didn't tell me that Michael was coming. You said you were going to play poker with the boys." A faint smile touched her lips. A smile of uncertainty. "Why did you lie to me?"

"It was that damned woman!" Bishop exploded.

"Mrs. O'Keefe telephoned me. She thought I ought to know what was going on. And I agree. If you have business with Michael, *secret* business . . ."

The unfinished sentence hung in the air. Michael's eyes asked a question but Miranda scarcely saw. There was another question. She felt it in every line of Bishop's slender, stiffened body. Heard it behind every word he spoke, in every angry, frightened undertone.

She asked, responding to intuition, speaking slowly, each word clearly enunciated: "Where is your son?"

Elizabeth looked across at her. "Boy?" she asked, in the same uncertain confusion. "He's . . ."

Bishop broke in: ". . . safely in bed"

Elizabeth flashed him a sharp look and turned back to Miranda

"Why do you ask?"

"You know why!"

Bishop put a hand through her arm and led her into the room.

"I'm sure *you'll* join me in a drink, darling. I'll fix you one."

Gently, firmly, she smiled up at him. "In a minute." She looked back at Miranda as if she clung to the bond of their mutual womanhood. "Who are you?" she asked.

It was Michael who answered. "This is Miranda," he said quietly. "We're going to be married."

She gave him a look without malice. A look of absolute well-wishing. "I'm glad," she said simply. "You should be married." Her eyes lifted to Bishop again. "It's a good state

of affairs" – she gave a light, uncertain laugh – "with the right person!"

Bishop's smile was strained. He patted her hand where it lay on his and moved away to the table. As he began to pour the drink Miranda got up.

"This is ridiculous!" she cried, her nerves snapping. "We can't go on like this – exchanging pleasant small talk – having drinks!" She saw Michael begin to speak but she hurried on, speaking to Elizabeth, excluding the men, making a direct appeal. "You and I," she said curtly, "must finish this."

"Finish what?"

Miranda checked. Was the other woman acting? Was it possible that she didn't know? It couldn't be. It made no sense.

"You produce your son," she said, cold and concise. "And I'll produce the money."

"The money?"

"Stop echoing me!" Miranda flared. "I'm not fooled by it! Nor by your act of sweetness and innocence. I know what you're like."

"Do you?" Elizabeth asked in a curious mixture of sadness and anger.

"I know that you'd do anything for money. Things no mother could do!" Elizabeth seemed to grow smaller. The look she threw at Michael was disquieting. In spite of her own anger, Miranda felt the touch of pity. "What kind of a woman *are* you?" she cried.

In a last attempt to control the course of the strange talk, Bishop moved quickly to Elizabeth's side. "Your drink, darling," he said.

She didn't even see him. Her gaze locked with Michael's. Her face was a deathly white. Understanding burned in her eyes. She stood stiffly, hands pressed against her sides as if they held her upright.

"So that's it."

The pain in her voice tore at Miranda's heart There was no doubting its honesty. Incredibly, it was clear Elizabeth had had no hand in the kidnapping of the boy. She wanted to go to her. To take the trembling, poker-stiff figure in her arms.

To comfort and strengthen. But she could only stand watching the woman's world crumble.

Bishop said, his voice smooth as cream, soft as a feather pillow in which he would suffocate thought. "I was going to tell you, darling. Tomorrow. When it was over. That's why I wanted you out of the way."

"Shut up!" Elizabeth's whisper was the most violent sound that had been in the room. The more frightening because of her previous calm.

He put his hands out for her but she stepped backwards, staring at him in wide-eyed horror. And a terrible, naked love.

"Listen to me!" he cried. "You must listen! I did it for you."

She shook her head in a gesture more heart-breaking than any outburst.

"I felt so hopeless. I know how much you need expensive things. You're so beautiful. I wanted to give you everything." His lips curled, bitterly. "I couldn't do it on my salary. He had plenty to spare. I didn't see why he shouldn't be made to part with some of it."

She broke in, cold and hard: "Where *is* Boy?"

Michael moved quickly across the room. As she looked at the three of them Miranda seemed to hear the sound of distant rumbling. They were, all of them, adrift on a rushing river. The waters moved faster. They were being swept, relentlessly, towards the rapids.

"For God's sake!" Michael's voice was harsh. "Don't you know?"

She looked round at him. Her eyes were black hollows. She had no need to speak. Her agony was plain to read.

"Bishop . . ." He swung on the man. "If you've done anything –"

"Keep your hair on!" Bishop's voice was calculatingly mocking. "The child's safe. I need him."

"Where have you taken him?"

Elizabeth's cry echoed round the room. She took a step sideways so that she and Michael faced the man together. Their child seemed to stand between them, an almost visible image on the trembling air, produced by their mutual fear.

Miranda felt a sickening sense of exclusion. Unable to watch, aware that Michael had forgotten her, that the bond between them had snapped at the moment of Elizabeth's entry, she moved away.

Trembling, shaken by her own personal fear, she stared at the floor-length, crimson curtains. Behind her, Bishop's voice was harsh. The air was thick in her lungs. The scent of roses heavy, drugging. A giddiness swam in her head. Dimly, from a far distance, she heard his words.

"Elizabeth, believe me, trust me. There's forty-five thousand pounds –"

"Fifty thousand," Michael said, "counting the five you've already had."

Bishop's laugh was like a knife grating on a plate.

"A round sum, Elizabeth. We can be comfortable on fifty thousand. Tell him to produce it and I'll tell you where Boy is."

Miranda stumbled against the thick curtains. It was as if she fell against a curtain of blood. The colour swam in her head. She couldn't breathe. Without knowing what she did, aware only that she must have air, she grabbed at the material with both hands. Flung it aside. It rattled, clattering on the rod above her head. But it wasn't the noise that held her paralysed, the cry strangled in her throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CURTAIN opened on to a recess in which the french windows were wide to the night. Fresh air flowed into the room. She didn't feel it. The garden was beautiful beneath the liquid flood of the moonlight. She didn't see it.

She felt only the shock.

Saw only the figure.

Leaning against the open window, unmoved by the sudden exposure, was the girl, Lulu.

In the second before she rearranged her features into a smile it was as if Miranda saw straight into her soul. It was this that

she had sensed when they had stood face to face in the bowling alley. Felt, but not understood. It was like seeing death for the first time. Even without warning it was recognisable. This was a truly evil human being. Lulu knew exactly what she was doing. If necessary, she would kill. It would be an act without passion. An act of controlled thought. In that smile there was no feeling. All humanity had been burned out of her.

As Miranda stared at the lounging figure, the spreading smile, her mind grasped at something else. It eluded her. Sliding beneath the level of consciousness.

Lulu moved. Easing her body away from the window in a slow, sensuous, movement.

The room came into sharp focus as Miranda swung round. For a moment, she saw their faces as if painted on a canvas. Elizabeth's shock. Michael's confusion. Bishop's – what *was* it she saw in Bishop's face? Even as she sought the meaning his expression changed.

He took a step forwards. Stopped. Said too-brightly, brittle as breaking glass: "What are you doing here?"

Lulu gave him a long, slow look. When she spoke it was in a low sing-song. Her voice penetrated the room, washing over them, urgent, powerful and quite horrible.

"Hallo, kids!" She swayed forwards, her hips clearly defined in the tight black trousers. "Nice to meet you! All of you!"

Her gaze travelled over each of them. The insolent, indolent smile curved her lips. Her eyes came, last, to Miranda.

"Quite a merry party," she said. "Thanks for letting me join you. I was getting bored just listening."

Miranda shivered beneath the touch of the glistening eyes. She tried to speak but her mind tripped over the questions that beat against each other, a flock of startled birds unable to find the way out.

Lulu had taken command. In silence, they all watched her move, smooth as a panther on the prowl, across the room to the central table. As she passed, Michael and Elizabeth stepped back but Bishop stood, watching her with a closed, concentrated attention.

"*I'll* have a drink," she said in the low, throaty crooning.

Her arm went out. Her body leaned sideways on an outthrust hip. There was an atmosphere about her, a controlled urgency, lacking in either of the men. Her mind was a vital force that held them all spellbound. They waited for her to reveal her single-minded purpose. Every muscle in her body throbbed with her intention. She had come alive. The wildness within her shone in every sensuous movement.

She flung back her head. Her throat gleamed above the black neckline of her jersey. The glass empty, she put it back on the table and turned to face them.

"What's up?" Her laugh rang out. "Cat got your tongues?"

Miranda's mind clicked. "Where's Rupert?" she asked.

"Rupert?"

"He brought you. Didn't he?"

"Natch! Who else?"

"Where is he?"

The eyelids narrowed. The smile went on and on. "He's – busy."

"Doing what?"

Michael broke in. "The car!"

In a few strides he was out of the window. Miranda moved to follow and stopped short. Whatever Rupert was doing to the car, there were things she must ask Lulu. She turned in time to see Bishop spring at the girl. He caught her arm and swung her round to face him.

"What's *he* doing here?" he snapped.

"Let go my arm! You're hurting me!"

He took her by both arms and shook her roughly.

"Answer me!"

Excitement glittered in her eyes. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" She pushed her face close to his. "Well, I'll tell you." She paused. There was drama in every line of her body, in the twist of her torso on her hips as she leaned back and laughed in his face. In the toss of her head, rising, flower-like, above the dark sweater. "I asked him to come."

Anger flared in Bishop's face. And something else. His features hardened and the blood suffused his skin. His eyes glowed with a red glaring light. He was drunk with fury. And

the other thing, the thing it was difficult to define. His fingers left her arms and leaped up to her neck.

"Bishop!" Miranda cried, and was distantly shocked that Elizabeth made no move. "Stop it!" She was across the room. "Stop! For God's sake, stop!"

Lulu was twisting her body. Her fingers tore at the man's hands. Miranda gripped his arm and shivered at the feel of the iron-bound muscles. He was beyond the sound of her cries. Beyond the reach of reason.

It was Elizabeth's cool, quiet voice that broke into the circle of his madness.

"You'll kill her."

The colour drained from his face. He stared at the girl's face above the necklace of his hands. They shot apart. He held them in the air in front of him, gazing at them in bewilderment.

Lulu coughed, retching, but she stood her ground. Voice and eyes poured contempt on him.

"You're a nut-case! That's what you are! A nut-case!"

He turned and reached for the remaining glass of whisky. Draining it, he poured himself another and flung that back.

Elizabeth stood motionless, her eyes on the girl who rubbed her neck with tender, searching fingers. She didn't speak. Her eyes were blank. Again, Miranda suppressed the impulse to go to her. Elizabeth must cope with her own problem.

She went quickly to the window. Where was Michael? As if in answer to her leaping panic he appeared round the corner of the moon-white house. Rupert walked in front of him, impelled forwards by a series of sharp jabs.

They reached the window. Michael gave the boy a final, violent thrust and he stumbled over the sill to stand staring round, sulkily swaggering. One hand thrust deep in his trouser pocket, the other supported the leather jacket over his shoulder, a finger through the loop.

"I wasn't doing nothing."

"You always carry this around with you!" Michael snapped.

He held out his hand. A large iron monkey-wrench gleamed dully. With a gesture of disdain, he threw it out into the night.

Rupert shrugged. Miranda stiffened as his eyes met hers.

The image of Polly, trussed and gagged, was printed deep in her mind.

"What will you get for assault?" she cried.

His gaze swept down her. She shivered beneath its touch. Incredibly, as his eyes came up to hers again, he grinned.

"Sorry I missed you!" he mocked.

He was brash. He was full of an impudent arrogance. But he was human. She looked from him to the girl. There was no warmth in Lulu. Only a calculating triumph.

Michael came into the room. His face was harsh. His power swept over them, drawing them all to look at him.

"Now," he said, "we're *all* here. Now we'll have a few explanations."

Rupert's eyes flashed a message at Lulu. Her eyes answered. He took a step towards her.

"Don't move!"

Rupert grinned at him. "Going to stop me?"

Michael put a hand in his pocket. The revolver gleamed.

"O.K.!" Rupert grimaced, shrugging. "You win!"

"First," Michael said. "Which of you two set fire to Mrs. Miller's tram?"

Rupert gave a barking laugh. "You crazy or something? D'you think, if we *had* done it, we'd say so? Just like that?"

Michael's eyes were fixed on his. For a moment he didn't speak. Then, slowly, without turning his head, he said: "Miranda, phone the police."

Miranda looked round. It was Elizabeth who offered. "It's in the hall. I'll go."

In silence she walked across the room. Her back was straight, her head high. Whatever she felt, she gave no sign of it. She had reached the door when Lulu cried: "Stop!" She turned round. Bishop, who had slumped on a chair, stood up. The focus of attention swung on to the truculent figure of the girl.

"I did it!" she said, and there was no guilt in her.

"*You* did." Instinctively, Miranda moved towards her and was stopped by a sharp look from Michael. "Why?"

The girl shrugged. "For kicks!"

Miranda stared at her in disbelieving horror.

"I went to get the doll," Lulu added as if it explained everything.

"The doll? How did you know it was there?"

"He told me!" The jerk of her head towards Bishop was charged with an easy intimacy. The flash of her eyes at Elizabeth held a clear meaning.

"You mean it was Mr. Bishop who thought of the doll?" Miranda asked dully.

"Who else?" Lulu's eyes snapped back at her.

"But *why*?"

"To pull you into line, of course," Lulu scoffed. "Your Michael thought himself so clever. Thought he could wriggle out of it. He needed a good scare to make him cough up the lolly."

"To be so cruel," Miranda whispered.

Lulu tossed her head. "It worked! And the boy's O.K. What you squawking about?"

The callousness of it held Miranda silent. Her eyes came round. Elizabeth stood motionless. She swayed a little on her feet so that the emerald on her bare skin caught the light and gleamed with a sea-green fire. Her lips were parted but no sound came from them. It was the look in her eyes that caught at Miranda's heart. A look of understanding, of compassion.

Michael's voice cut like a knife. "And the episode on the boat? Was that you, too?"

With an effort, Miranda looked back. Lulu hadn't moved. She faced them all, sure of her own strength. She was, visibly, enjoying herself. The purpose shone in her. Ruthless. Evil.

"Me and Rupert," she smiled, licking her lips.

No one heard Bishop's strangled cry. None saw him move, slowly, silently, inching sideways.

"For kicks," Miranda whispered. "You faked the doll to look like a dead child –"

Lulu shrugged. "Life's boring," she cried on a sudden rising note. "Dead boring! You've got to do something. It was fun! I thought I'd die laughing when you turned up just after we'd fixed it!" She shook her head at Miranda. "You nearly spoiled it all by coming so soon. We were going to leave a note at the hotel telling you to go there. We only just had time

to get out of the cabin and hide on deck." Her laugh was shrill. "It was really, funny – us being there – you finding it. And, then, locking you in! That killed me! My idea, that was. It was Rupert who dreamed up to set you adrift." Her mouth drooped in regret. "Wish *I'd* thought of it. That was really dreamy."

There was a sudden flurry. Miranda swung on her heel. Bishop had come up to Michael and in a quick jab with the side of his hand against the poised wrist he sent the gun flying from nerveless fingers. The three men lunged simultaneously. Only Bishop was prepared. He bent, grabbed the gun and sprang away in a single, swinging movement. Michael and Rupert swayed, reaching for him.

"Get back! Get back!"

Miranda flashed a look at Michael. Surely, he'd speak, say that the gun was unloaded. She saw him hesitate. Saw his lips close firmly upon each other. Saw his warning glance and caught the words behind clenched teeth.

Bishop said: "Right, Mrs. Miller. I'll have the key to the car."

Michael broke in, sharp and clear. "Why, Bishop?"

The man's lips sneered. "The money's in the car, isn't it?" He held out a hand to Miranda. "The key," he snapped.

"*I've* got it," Michael said softly.

Bishop's eyes narrowed. The two men faced each other but they knew that the control had gone from Bishop. He was trying to grab at it but it slipped through his fingers. He thrust a hand into his pocket. When he withdrew it he held a large, old-fashioned key.

"What's that?" Michael asked, his voice taut.

"It opens the door to the attic. You'll find your son there."

There was a soft cry from Elizabeth, but no one moved. Bishop threw the key at Michael's feet.

"Don't pick it up!" he warned. "I'll have yours first."

Michael's wrist flicked. As Bishop bent, he moved. Instantly the man straightened.

"Don't try anything!" he cried. He looked round the room slowly, part in pride, part in defiance. "Well – this is it," he said. His eyes came to Elizabeth and a shadow fell across his

face. "The boy's unhurt," he said. "I had to keep him sleepy. But he's all right."

She said with a quiet, heart-breaking dignity: "This is the end for us."

"Yes."

"You *did* love me. . . ." It was no more than a whisper.

"For a time –"

"I – I don't understand. What went wrong?"

"*I* did." He gave a short barking laugh. "In every way! It's no use saying I'm sorry, Elizabeth, but I am. I don't want to hurt you. I can't help it." He looked away from her and a flame leaped in his eyes. "Come, Lulu." He held out a hand to her. "Let's go."

For a moment the girl stared at him in silence. Slowly, horribly, a smile lifted the corners of her mouth. In a parody of Elizabeth's quiet dignity, held poised, hands on her flaunting hips, she said: "This is the end of us."

"Don't be silly, Lulu." He snapped impatiently, but there was fear in his voice. "This is what we planned. I didn't mean Elizabeth to be here – but she is. There's no point in pretending any longer."

"There isn't – is there?" she mocked in her sing-song voice.

He tried to speak but his throat closed convulsively. His face was grey, his eyes pleaded desperately.

She swaggered across the room until she stood close to the pointing gun. She pressed her stomach against it, laughing. The pleasure she took in destroying him was terrible to watch.

"Did you really kid yourself that it was *you* I wanted?" Her laugh rang out. "I said I'd tell you why Rupert's here. It's dead simple. We've come for the money."

"No! No!" It was a hoarse cry.

"Yes! Yes!" She imitated his tone with cruel emphasis.

"All this time – all the plans –"

She broke in, cold in her triumph. "Were all for Rupert."

"But you said –"

"Words cost nothing!" She thrust her face close to his. "Can't you get it into your head – I never *wanted* you. Never. It was always Rupert. Who thought of the plan? Who suggested Rupert for the job? Didn't you wonder why?" She

stood away, laughing in his face. "You were easy! You did everything I wanted. Now the ride's over!"

She stepped away. A nod brought Rupert to her side. He put an arm round her waist and she leaned against him.

Bishop stared at them. His body was stiff. A muscle twitched at the corner of his jaw.

"The key," Lulu said.

"I'll see you in hell first!"

"We don't need it," Rupert grinned. "I got the money out of the boot. Let's go. I've had a bellyful!"

They had reached the window when Bishop came to life. He swung round, his finger pressing the trigger. There was a faint click. And another.

Rupert paused, his eyes bright with fear. He began to laugh, deep-throated, with rich gusto.

"Stone me! I didn't think you had the nerve! This *is* your lucky day! Man, are you lucky! If it had been loaded – oh, boy!"

"You're no good at this kind of thing, Bishop." Lulu's laughter mingled with his. "Take my advice. Get your wife to take you back. If you can. You haven't got the brain for anything else."

They moved. The window gaped, empty. In the silence the sound of Bishop's breathing was loud. He stared at the hollow space. A shudder passed over him.

Michael spoke his name tentatively.

As if it released him from the paralysis, suddenly, violently, he flung the revolver from him. The roar of a motor-cycle blazed, drowning the crash of the gun against the vase of roses in the fireplace.

Bishop leaped for the window.

They waited for the sound they knew must come. The car's engine spluttered into life. It swelled and faded.

Silence flowed back. The faint tinkle of the crystal chandelier. The distant splash of the waves.

Miranda turned. Michael was looking at Elizabeth. Without speaking they went, together, out into the hall.

She took a few, faltering steps. Stopped. A great weariness

enveloped her. Boy was their son. She had no right to follow them.

She looked round the room, dazed, drained. Was this the end for her, too?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DAWN FILTERED into the room, touching their faces with colour. They sat in a tight circle whose centre was the boy, asleep beneath a rug on the sofa. The police sergeant stood beside the fireplace with its scattered roses and looked at them with serious concentration.

"The girl was killed instantly," he said in a cool, official voice. "Silly young fools. They will ride without helmets."

"Do you know how it happened?" Howard asked.

The policeman shrugged. "We caught up with them. The boy tried to cut in on a corner – that one on the hill –"

As she listened, Miranda saw it all. Sharp turn to the right. Sharp fall into the field. It was easy to imagine the sequence of events. Rupert on his motor-cycle, Lulu clutching the suitcase between his body and hers. Bishop coming up behind them, lights blazing. Lulu's laughing: "Let him pass!" The sudden sweep of the car as the motor-cycle slowed. Bishop's look in the mirror, dazzled by the cycle's lamp. Lulu's voice, shrill above the roar of the engine: "Now! On the corner! Let's go!" The moment of danger rushing to meet them. The curve of the corner. The fine razor-edge of timing. The "fun" of dicing with death.

This time, the miscalculation. This time, the motor-cycle cutting too closely round the car.

Or had Bishop, in his madness of jealous frustration, turned the wheel a fraction too late?

There was no way of knowing.

Facts were all that anyone would ever know.

The car's mudguard sliced at the back wheel of the cycle. Rupert crashed on to the bonnet and was carried, helpless. Lulu, the suitcase impeding her, was flung headfirst on to the

macadam. The suitcase bursting open, spilling the wads of notes around her motionless, sprawling body.

"And Rupert?" Howard asked.

"A broken leg and three fractured ribs. He'll live. We'll get him for killing by dangerous driving."

Miranda asked, with a fleeting compassion. "Isn't it a terrible thing if someone takes heroin and is suddenly cut off?"

The sergeant gave her a sharp look. "It is," he said grimly. "What do you know about that?"

"Only . . . someone told me that Rupert smokes reefers."

"I'll go along to the hospital. They'll need to know."

He walked with a slow, lumbering step across the room until he towered over Michael. "There's the question of the money, sir. I must admit it's got me puzzled."

Michael made no move. He sat, leaning forwards, gazing at the boy on the sofa. He was withdrawn from the room, waiting for the moment of awakening.

The sergeant tried again. "It's unfinished. We don't like untidy ends."

Without looking up, Michael said: "I'm afraid this one will have to remain untidy."

"You don't intend to prefer charges, sir?"

"I don't intend to prefer charges. I've got the money back. I want nothing more to do with it."

"It's not right!" The policeman was insistent. "If only people would realise –"

Michael looked up. "Their responsibilities as citizens." A faint smile touched his face. "I'm sorry, sergeant. Believe me, I'm sorry. I agree with everything you say. I can't explain – but I don't intend to do anything about it. I've done a lot of things in the past few days I don't agree with. Endured a lot of things I dare say, if I'd come to you, I needn't have endured. I had, what seemed to me, the best of reasons." His eyes returned to the pale, small face on the cushion. "It hasn't changed."

"Very good, Mr. Sheridan." The sergeant was disapproving in the moment of yielding. "In that case I'll bid you good morning."

It was Elizabeth who went with him to the door. Miranda

got up and walked to the window. The sun had risen and the sea sparkled. The air was fresh and cool, but already the hint of heat was in its breath. It was the first moment of peace since Howard and the police car had raced up to the house only a few minutes after Bishop had gone. Raced away again when she had told them of the motor-cycle and Bishop in her own car.

"I suppose," she said, "it was Polly who told you where we'd be."

"If only I'd got her to talk sooner!"

Miranda drew in a deep breath. "She's stubborn as they come! If she'd told us before we left. . . ."

If! If! She turned back into the room as Elizabeth spoke.

"I've told Mrs. O'Keefe to make tea," she said. "I think we all need it." She sat on a chair and looked at Michael.

He raised his eyes. "Yes," he said as if she had said something else.

"I owe you some kind of explanation."

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," he said quietly, "if I misjudged you."

"You had good reason to think of me as you did. I treated you badly." Her eyes were steady. "But I wouldn't have done this dreadful thing to Boy. I didn't know – any of it." She faltered, sat straighter as she went on. "The boat, which Bishop told me was for my pleasure, was a blind to get me out of the way. I haven't been in this house all the time. He asked me to stay with his father. He said he was decorating here. A surprise for me.

"I had no reason to doubt him. Not until I telephoned Mrs. O'Keefe yesterday morning. It was her birthday. I was going to ask her to come and see me. When she told me about your visit, I began thinking. I couldn't come back here myself without rousing suspicion. I *could* send *her*. To look after things. To get food for the poker party.

"I'm not trying to exonerate him – but it was that girl. He's weak. That's why I loved him. You were always so strong. Even before you were successful – you didn't need me as he did."

Her voice faded. Her eyes fell away from Michael's. Her fingers twisted, endlessly, on a handkerchief.

Michael moved uneasily in his chair. "Elizabeth," he began.

She got up and walked to the open window. "Don't say anything. There's nothing to say. I wanted you to know. That's all."

Mrs. O'Keefe came in with a tray. With relief Miranda looked at her. The atmosphere of tension had gone. Her face was all warmth and concern as she asked: "Would you like me to pour, madam?"

Elizabeth nodded.

When the telephone rang, they knew that this was what they were waiting for.

She ran across the room. Her voice came from the hall, but no words. Mrs. O'Keefe passed the cups.

When Elizabeth came back, her eyes were wet.

"That was the hospital. He's cut his head but there's no concussion. I can go and see him."

Miranda cried: "You're going?"

The other woman looked at her, the tears brimming, falling unchecked down her cheeks.

"Yes," she said simply. "I am."

"But . . ." Miranda stopped short.

"He'll need me more now – now the girl's dead."

"You can forgive him?"

"I don't know." Her voice broke, dropped. "Even if I *can* forgive what he's done, it'll be hard to forget. It'd be impossible to stop loving him." She went quickly to Michael. He stood and they looked at each other. "Did you mean it – not bringing a case against him for kidnapping Boy?"

He nodded. "There's nothing to gain by such an action." His voice was stilted. He tried again. "I only want to be free of it all. Boy must be kept out of it."

She drew in a sharp breath but her voice was steady. "You needn't be afraid," she said. "We'll go away. We've talked of Canada. Now – it's our only chance. I don't want to see Boy again."

"But Elizabeth –"

"Please. I mean it. I couldn't bear it. I'd rather make the break now."

He held out his hand. She put hers in it and he enclosed it with both his own. In a moment she drew hers away and turned to Miranda.

"I don't feel that I need say this – but don't let him think badly of me."

Miranda felt the tears in her own eyes. "You'll write."

Elizabeth nodded. "I'll send you snaps of the new baby." The smile on her lips was gentle, her eyes soft behind the drying tears. "Oh yes, I'm going to have a baby. I think this is the moment to tell its papa – don't you?"

"Yes," Miranda said softly, "I think it is."

She walked quickly to the door. Howard followed.

"Would you like me to drive you?" he asked.

"Thanks. I would."

They went out of the room. Mrs. O'Keefe stood, looking after them. Then she turned to Michael.

"I hope you'll understand, sir, if I give you my notice."

"You're going to Canada?" Michael asked.

The smile broadened, softening the harsh lines of her face. "I hope I can stand the weather!" she laughed. Adding: "Good-bye, Mr. Sheridan."

He shook her hand. "Good-bye, Mrs. O'Keefe."

They were alone. She and Michael and the child. The sound of Howard's car swelled. Faded.

He held out his hand. She went to him. It had not been the end for her. He had come back when she had stood lonely and afraid. He had taken her hand, as he did now, holding it firmly within his, and had led her up the stairs to where Elizabeth waited. They had gone, together, into the attic where the child lay, sleeping on a camp-bed. It was Elizabeth who had stood back while they bent over the small, pathetic face with its half-moons of thick lashes.

She sat, now, at Michael's side, waiting together for the eyes to lift, for the boy to look up at them.

Half-laughing, half-crying, she said: "I think I'd like a cigarette."

He gave her one. "Tired?" he asked as his lighter flared.

"Not now." She drew on the cigarette. "See!" she laughed. "I'm learning!" She looked back at the sleeping child. "I hope I learn to be a good stepmother."

"*I* hope," he smiled, "Boy learns to be a good stepson! We'll all have to learn our lessons."

"Sounds horribly serious!"

"It is! But it'll be fun, too! It isn't only teenagers who get a kick out of living! We old folk have our moments, too!"

"Ssh!" She put a hand on his. "He's waking."

The eyes opened. They were blue as Elizabeth's and, instantly, fully conscious.

"Hallo, Dad!"

"Hallo, son. How's tricks?"

He sat up. "Has Mr. Bishop gone?" There was no fear in his voice.

"He's gone."

"Will *I* have something to tell them at school!" His eyes were bright. Colour rose in his cheeks. "It was just like a story! Shut up in this house!"

Michael said: "I want you to meet Miranda."

"Hallo!" He flung the greeting at her in casual acceptance. "Dad! I wasn't frightened. Not after the accident. I worried about you, of course, but he told me you were O.K. He gave me bangers and mash! Every day!"

Miranda caught Michael's eye. A laugh rose up within her, free and easy, ripe with happiness.

She said. "I'm hungry. Let's go and get some more sausage and mash."

The boy looked up at her. "Do *you* like them, too?"

"It's my favourite meal."

"Honest?"

"Cut my throat!" She reached out and took his hand. "Of course, sometimes I like chicken.'

"The wing or the drumstick?"

"The wing."

"That's all right! I like the drumstick."

Over his head, she looked at the man. "Let's go," she said.

"Home?" the boy asked.

"Home," Michael said.

"Is Miranda coming with us?"

"Yes."

"Oh good! I can show you my train. It's a trix. You can run two trains on the same track . . ."

For them, it had been a nightmare. For the child, an adventure. Everything was coloured, Miranda thought, listening to his chatter, by the angle of one's own perspective. The child's hand hot within her own, it was impossible to believe that only a few days ago she had been desperate.

She looked at Michael as he opened the front door for them.

As if he felt her thought, he said: "We must forget. Today, we start again. Together."

The sun was warm. Her car waited where Howard had left it. The front wing was scarcely dented. There was no other sign of the accident that had cost Lulu her life. The door slammed behind them. Boy jumped down the steps. She, too, leaped the steps, and turned to laugh at the man who followed.

"Come on!" she called. "We're hungry for bangers and mash."

GIRL ALONE

by

JANE BLACKMORE

Maria came to England as an *au pair* girl, brimming with enthusiasm for a job which would make her independent of her brutal father. But her new home turned out to be just another prison, where even her competence and good looks increased marital discord. Maria turned to her one friend, Tom, but he too had grown suspicious of her direct manner and odd relationship with his brother Rupert.

Maria felt trapped. On the one hand there were her employers and on the other Rupert and the sophisticated Paula with their secretive designs. Who could she turn to in this strange land? Must she admit defeat and return to Germany?

IT COULDN'T HAPPEN TO ME

by

JANE BLACKMORE

A whirlwind courtship, marriage and honeymoon were followed by days and nights of terror, when Tansy left the security of Jersey to make a new life with Ivor Kelvin in London.

The first horror was the introduction to his half-crazed aunt, keeping house in Bayswater, maliciously hinting at Ivor's past and a girl called Phyllida. Then anonymous letters began to arrive, each revealing more dark secrets about Ivor, testing Tansy's loyalty and arousing suspicions which had to be allayed.

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Miranda planned her suicide as an escape from her now empty life and the guilt she felt for her little daughter's death, a guilt which no coroner could remove. Longing for oblivion, she spooned the bitter-tasting drug, but was interrupted by the sound of tyres screeching on the clifftop road, followed by the frightened scream of a child. With burning memories of Sally's death she could not resist the call for action.

Soon Miranda found herself enmeshed in the struggle between a man and his wife for possession of their child – the boy whose cry she had heard when the kidnapper sprung his trap. She was drawn to Michael Sheridan by his uncanny resemblence to her dead husband. Her new love was sweet, but she feared Michael's barely-contained violence and his determination to regain his son at any cost.

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